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FROM WORK–LIFE BALANCE TO INTEGRATION: SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS IN HIGH-TECH

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Abstract

This paper examines the shift from talk of “work–life balance” to the everyday practice of work–life integration in high-tech, using Israeli firms closely coupled to United States time zones as a critical case. Drawing on nineteen semi-structured interviews with engineers, product leaders, recruiters, and executives, the study synthesizes classic lenses of conflict/enrichment, boundary fit, and demands–resources with current organizational realities such as hybrid work and return-to-office policies. The analysis identifies a practical core to integration: temporal equity. Outcomes depend less on total hours and more on four conditions operating together: usable schedule, control, boundary fit between preferences and team routines, contained connectivity load so evenings do not become “shadow stand-ups,” and credit decoupled from live presence through artifacts (recorded demos, written kudos, sponsor-of-record practices). Interviews show how Israeli–U.S. coordination creates a recurrent “time-zone tax,” how mental load extends beyond leave into daily logistics, and how simple routines protected family bands with written exceptions, mirrored ceremonies across time zones, rota audits for late hours reduce friction without slowing delivery. Men’s planned co-ownership of care appears as a small but notable cultural shift. The paper contributes a clear, practice-oriented lens on integration and a lightweight measurement sketch for teams to make time costs visible. Managing when work happens and how recognition is earned, rather than only where work occurs, enables the same total hours to sustain careers without taxing family life.

Keywords: work–life integration; work–life balance; women in tech; hybrid work; temporal equity.

JEL Classification: J16; J22; J28; M12; O33.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the shift from talk of “work–life balance” to the everyday practice of work–life integration in high-tech. Balance language treated work and family as competing spheres and focused on managing clashes. Integration treats time, attention, and coordination as design variables, and asks when work happens, who controls that timing, and who pays the family cost. Classic models of conflict and enrichment explain why demands and resources

spill across roles, while boundary and border perspectives highlight the importance of fit between preferred and enacted boundaries. Job Demands–Resources and Conservation of Resources frameworks clarify why autonomy and recovery matter once connectivity blurs the edges of the day. Together, these ideas motivate a move from slogans to routines.

The empirical setting is Israeli high-tech, a sector that combines strong family centrality with close alignment to United States time zones. Evening meetings, early-morning calls, and push-channel chatter after hours are common. At the same time, firms have adopted hybrid arrangements and, in some cases, tighter return-to-office rules. These cross-pressures make the setting useful for understanding how integration succeeds or fails in practice. The question is not only whether people work long hours, but whether timing is predictable and shared fairly, whether schedule control is usable without penalty, and whether recognition depends on being live and visible at night.

The study draws on nineteen semi-structured interviews with professionals in Israeli high-tech, spanning engineering, product, recruiting, people operations, and executive roles. Interviews were conducted and translated with participant identifiers masked. We analyze how people describe hours and availability, time-zone burdens, mental load at home, boundary preferences and friction, communication norms, and the routines that make hybrid work durable. The goal is to surface concrete practices rather than abstract preferences.

Three research questions guide the paper. First, how have perceptions shifted from balance to integration in the lived experience of high-tech workers, and what does integration look like on a normal week. Second, which mechanisms best explain better outcomes in hybrid arrangements, with attention to boundary fit, schedule control, connectivity load, and how credit is assigned. Third, how do team and company choices interact with national or cultural context, especially in work tied to United States hours.

The main argument is that integration succeeds when time and credit are managed deliberately. At the individual level, people need visible and usable schedule control, along with partner planning and simple guardrails. At the team level, cadence must be predictable and fair, especially where time-zone overlap is required. At the organizational level, recognition needs to be attached to artifacts and outcomes so that live evening presence is not the currency of advancement. When these conditions are in place at the same time, the same total hours produce less conflict and more sustainable participation.

This paper contributes in three ways. Conceptually, it offers a temporal equity lens that unites boundary fit, schedule control, connectivity load, and credit design in a single frame. Empirically, it documents how workers describe a chronological arc within single careers, from assumed separation, through ideal-worker norms and perk-saturated presence, into pandemic disruption and current integration. Practically, it specifies low-cost routines that teams can adopt:

protected family bands with written exceptions, mirrored ceremonies across time zones, rotation and audit of late-hour burdens, and default use of recorded demos and written kudos so that visibility is not tied to the clock. A brief measurement sketch is also proposed, a lightweight set of indicators that teams can compute from existing tools in order to make time costs visible and discussable.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. The literature review situates the move from balance to integration and identifies the mechanisms most relevant to time and recognition. The findings present verbatim accounts that show how hours, time-zone work, mental load, boundaries, communication, and recognition play out in daily routines. The discussion integrates theory, current organizational trends, and the interview evidence, and outlines a multifaceted intervention at individual, cultural, and organizational levels. The conclusion summarizes the implications and points to simple measures that can support better decisions about when work happens and how credit is assigned.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We frame work–life integration through boundary and resource lenses and translate them into a practical focus on temporal equity, who controls time, how team routines fit people’s preferences, how much connectivity load exists, and whether recognition depends on live presence. Boundary and border theories explain how people prefer to separate or blend roles and how mismatch creates friction (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000; Clark, 2000), while a person-centered view shows distinct boundary profiles with different needs for control (Kossek et al., 2012). The Job Demands–Resources model predicts that usable autonomy and recovery buffer cognitive and coordination demands (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), and Conservation of Resources theory explains why continual connectivity and unpredictability can drain resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Evidence on telework and mobile email clarifies the mechanism: flexibility helps when paired with real control, but “always-on” tools can recreate pressure and extend the workday (Allen, Golden and Shockley, 2015; Barley, Meyerson and Grodal, 2011; Mazmanian, Orlikowski and Yates, 2013). At the team level, temporal structuring shows that groups “make” time through routines; predictable cadence and required downtime reduce overload without slowing delivery (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002; Perlow and Porter, 2009). Cultural expectations also matter: ideal-worker norms embed availability as a signal of commitment (Acker, 1990), and role-congruity theory helps explain penalties when evaluation uses presence as a cue for leadership potential (Eagly and Karau, 2002). We use these strands together to justify focusing on schedule control, boundary fit, connectivity load, and credit design; where needed, we contrast advice with advocacy using a single sponsorship anchor (Ibarra, Carter and Silva, 2010) while keeping the primary lens on time and recognition rather than networks.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research traces a long move from assumed separation of work and family to today's focus on integration. Early work showed how the "ideal worker" is built into organizational routines always available, disembodied from care, and judged by presence (Acker, 1990). Classic theories map the mechanisms behind strain and value. Conflict work identifies time-, strain-, and behavior-based clashes between roles (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985), while enrichment shows how resources can also flow across roles when conditions support them (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). Border and boundary perspectives explain how people draw lines between domains and how permeability and flexibility shape fit; when team cadence clashes with personal preferences, friction rises (Clark, 2000; Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000). These strands ground a shift from slogans to the design of time.

From the 1990s onward, studies linked commitment to long hours and constant availability. Ethnography captured a "time famine," where responsiveness after hours became normal and interruptions fragmented the day (Perlow, 1999). This pattern was not only about individual time management but about organizational designs that reward availability signals (Acker, 1990). Evaluation research adds that such signals can bias judgments of leadership potential: role congruity theory shows how cues that equate visibility with agency can disadvantage some groups (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Together, these findings explain why reducing hours alone rarely fixes the problem if the currency of recognition remains a live presence.

In the 2010s, telework spread, but effects depended on design and climate. A major review finds that remote work can lower conflict when paired with autonomy, supportive supervision, and clarity on expectations; without these, benefits fade (Allen, Golden and Shockley, 2015). Boundary research shows people differ in preferred profilesome segment tightly, others integratebut all need usable control to make arrangements work (Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy and Hannum, 2012). When organizational routines ignore these profiles, employees face continual boundary crossing, with higher strain and lower satisfaction (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000; Clark, 2000).

Mobile tools then introduced an "autonomy paradox." E-mail and chat promised flexibility but extended work temporally and socially, creating expectations of rapid response and turning communication into a symbol of commitment (Barley, Meyerson and Grodal, 2011). Professionals internalized "always-on" norms that undercut recovery despite formal flexibility (Mazmanian, Orlikowski and Yates, 2013). Two complementary theories explain the costs. The Job Demands–Resources model predicts higher strain when coordination load and interruptions rise without matching resources like control and recovery (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Conservation of Resources theory warns of loss spirals when demands repeatedly drain time and attention with little chance to rebuild

them (Hobfoll, 1989). These lenses shift attention from where work happens to when it happens and how predictable it is.

Evidence on solutions points to cadence and collective rules, not slogans. Temporal structuring research shows that teams “make” time through routinized shared rhythms, ceremony timing, and agreed handoffs (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002). Interventions that make time off predictable reduce overload without hurting performance because they reset group expectations, not just individual habits (Perlow and Porter, 2009). In practice, this means visible protected bands, mirrored ceremonies for different time zones, and rota fairness for awkward hours so the same people do not absorb the burden week after week.

A policy lens reaches similar conclusions. Comparative reviews document both the gains and the risks of widespread telework, including digital fatigue and after-hours encroachment, and point to “right-to-disconnect” safeguards as a complement to team practice (Eurofound, 2023). The implication is that teams benefit from two layers of protection: local routines that shape daily cadence and basic institutional rules that protect non-work time.

Recent studies also inform current return-to-office debates. A large randomized trial shows that two days a week of work from home reduces quits by about one-third with no performance loss, suggesting moderate hybrid can be a retention lever when designed well (Bloom, Han and Liang, 2024). This does not by itself settle the question of where work should occur; rather, it supports a focus on cadence, predictability, and fairness. Mandates that ignore boundary fit and usable control risk reproducing presence premiums without solving coordination problems (Allen, Golden and Shockley, 2015).

Recognition practices are a missing but critical piece. When evaluation relies on live presence and informal access, people who cannot join late-evening discussions can lose visibility. Evidence distinguishes advice from advocacy: sponsors broker opportunities, name contributors, and share risk at decision points (Ibarra, Carter and Silva, 2010). Linking recognition to artifacts—recorded demos, written kudos, authorship norms—allows asynchronous contribution to count and reduces reliance on being “in the room.” Related research also warns that flexible options can backfire under availability norms, creating a “flexibility stigma” unless leaders redesign how contribution is seen (Leslie, Manchester, Park and Mehng, 2012).

Taken together, the literature supports a practical lens on work–life integration that centers temporal equity. Four conditions matter at the same time: schedule control that people can use without penalty; boundary fit between preferences and team routines; a contained connectivity load so push channels do not become “shadow stand-ups”; and recognition tied to artifacts and outcomes rather than live presence (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Hobfoll, 1989; Orlikowski and Yates, 2002; Perlow and Porter, 2009; Allen, Golden and Shockley, 2015). Under these conditions, the same total hours can produce less conflict and more sustainable participation; without them, time-zone coordination

and “always-on” tools recreate the very pressures that balance rhetoric aimed to solve (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Eurofound, 2023; Bloom, Han and Liang, 2024).

4. METHODOLOGY

We used a qualitative, interpretivist design to study work–life integration in Israeli high-tech. Using purposive and snowball sampling, we recruited 19 participants engineers, product leads, recruiters/people ops, and executives who coordinate with U.S. time zones and have hybrid/RTO experience. Semi-structured interviews (~60 minutes, in person or video) focused on weekly cadence, overlapping windows and rota for late hours, after-hours messaging, schedule control, and how credit is shown (recorded demos, written kudos, authorship). With consent, we recorded interviews, translated Hebrew to English with a bilingual check, anonymized transcripts, and stored files securely.

We analysed transcripts thematically. We read closely, wrote short memos, marked recurring ideas, and grouped them around a “temporal equity” lens schedule control, boundary fit, connectivity load, and credit decoupled from live presence. We compared patterns across roles and noted counter-examples (e.g., heavy U.S. overlap with low evening load). A second researcher reviewed a sample to challenge our readings. The lead author works in Israeli high-tech and is a parent; to limit bias we sought disconfirming cases and kept claims at the mechanism level rather than firm-specific advice. Findings support analytic, not statistical, generalization.

5. FINDINGS

Long hours and omnipresent availability still frame the baseline of working life. Several participants describe an “ideal worker” residue that does not vanish even when people embrace demanding roles or senior responsibility. One puts it plainly: “I work a lot of hours.” [P07] Another reflects on the limits that parenthood imposed on speed and stamina: “I personally felt that after becoming a mother, I couldn’t keep up, I had to make trade-offs... I wasn’t willing to sacrifice family time for work.” [P01] The message that emerges across accounts is not simply that hours are high, but that the timing of those hours, and who pays the timing cost at home, matters most.

The Israeli-U.S. time-zone gap repeatedly compresses family time into the evenings and pulls people into very early mornings. One participant recalls “working late nights constantly” because two of the team were in California and the manager was in the United States, so priorities were U.S.-based [P04]. The same interview notes the daily trade-off: “I had to sacrifice my afternoons and evenings just to stay aligned with work...I lost my entire evening and family time, staying online late to align with U.S. teams. It wasn’t sustainable.” [P04] Others describe redesigning their day to absorb the overlap more cleanly: “Now, I shift

my schedule later to overlap with the US, but I still have mornings with my family.” [P16] In some teams, managers formalized the cadence: “I scheduled management meetings from 17:00 to 20:00 because the U.S. team is available.” [P19] Where such decisions were explicit and shared, the time-zone tax became visible and therefore governable.

Beyond leave or formal policies, many speak about the mental load, the constant to-do list in one’s head, and the everyday logistics that make or break family life. “When you become a parent, your life becomes a series of choices.” [P02] As one interviewee puts it, the cultural script raises the bar on both fronts: “Even if a woman truly wants to advance, Israeli culture highly values both family life and extreme professional ambition... There’s immense pressure to succeed in both.” [P02] Everyday spaces reflect this split: “When women are at the playground with their kids, they talk about daycare, babysitters, and after-school activities... They are networking, and we are not.” [P08] Coping often means operational help and deliberate trade-offs. “People always ask how I ‘manage.’ I always say, ‘I don’t.’ There are a lot of balls in the air... I try to control which ones drop.” [P15]

Outcomes hinge on boundary fit, the match between how people prefer to manage roles and how their team actually works. Several narratives trace a move from burnout to more deliberate guardrails: “Work-life balance is important to me, I once burned out after working at a startup. I took a six-month break... Now, I try to set boundaries: avoiding late-night work... blocking out personal time in my calendar... not overloading myself.” [P06] Leaders who signal room for discretion help align preferences with practice: “I allow flexibility for my team, I don’t set strict rules about remote work.” [P16] Where people could see and trust those boundaries, friction fell even when total hours remained high.

The shape of successful integration is less about generic flexibility and more about schedule control, visible and predictable choices about when work happens. Some participants describe explicit swaps that protect family time without lowering delivery: “I’m home in the evenings... I bathe [the kids]... and then I get back to my work later in the evening if necessary.” [P18] Others emphasize that partnership is a practical enabler: “It’s incredibly difficult to climb while raising kids unless you have a supportive partner.” [P01] Together with calendar blocks and predictable overlaps, these patterns turn abstract balance into concrete daily design.

Connectivity can quietly recreate the presence premium if not managed. One interviewee sketches a communications environment where push channels become the real meeting: “We communicated through pings and almost never used email.” [P10] Another offers the implicit rule of advancement in such cultures: “Be present in leadership discussions, in social interactions, in high-stakes meetings.” [P19] Without counterweights, evening quick syncs and real-time visibility stand in for impact. The teams that avoided this drift tended to

anchor credit to artifacts and plan for asynchronous participation rather than rewarding whoever could be online at 22:00.

That shift toward credit without “always on” runs through multiple accounts. One participant advises, “Document your successes... prove your value, and ask for what you deserve.” [P02] Another ties visibility to written evidence and proactive application: “First, tailor your resume to the job and don’t be afraid to apply...” [P09] Even late-stage career conversations show how emotional and uneven these moments can be: “Even as a manager... salary discussions were highly emotional. I’ve seen women cry during salary negotiations.” [P11] Documented impact, routine kudos in writing, and clear criteria help de-link recognition from live presence.

Men’s co-ownership of care appears in scheduled routines rather than ad hoc help. One father explains, “I’m home in the evenings... I make it a priority to be with my kids... then I get back to my work later in the evening if necessary.” [P18] A parallel observation from another interview captures the prevailing pattern: “Men generally sacrifice their afternoons and then make it home for bedtime and the kids’ nighttime routine.” [P04] When such norms are named and accepted on teams, evening caregiving stops being an exception that needs apology and becomes part of how the team plans time.

Finally, career design moves, stepping back, switching tracks, or pacing across life stages, feature prominently. One participant describes a decisive reset: “I recently decided to step down from my VP role... I recently asked to leave my role... and just transition, but as an individual contributor rather than in a management role.” [P04] Others recount pauses that preserved sustainability and growth: “I once burned out... I took a six-month break.” [P06] “About six months ago, I... stepped back from being CEO, I needed to handle something personal.” [P12] Even abrupt setbacks became turning points: “When I returned from maternity leave... I was called in for a termination meeting... I told myself, I’ll reinvent myself. I want to be independent.” [P10] Across these accounts, integration arrives not as a single policy but as a bundle of temporal practices, guardrails, swaps, predictable overlaps, and credit practices that let people meet global coordination demands without paying for visibility with family time. Where those practices are absent or informal, the time-zone tax and presence premium resurface. Where they are explicit and shared, people report less friction and more durable careers.

6. DISCUSSION

This study reframes the move from work–life balance to integration as a problem of temporal equity: not only how much people work, but when, with what control, and at what family cost. Classic conflict and enrichment lenses explain why integration can both reduce friction and create value (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). Boundary and border theories highlight the

importance of fit between preferred and enacted boundaries (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000; Clark, 2000). The Job Demands–Resources model predicts that usable autonomy and recovery buffer the cognitive and coordination demands of hybrid work (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), and Conservation of Resources theory explains exhaustion when continual connectivity erodes recovery (Hobfoll, 1989). Our interviews show how these mechanisms play out, and how simple routines convert flexibility into predictable cadence rather than “always on.”

Individual factors

Participants’ practices show that schedule craftsmanship matters more than a generic promise of flexibility. Several describe the pull of the ideal-worker norm (“I work a lot of hours” [P07]) and the need for guardrails after burnout ([P06]). People adopt micro-moves JD–R would frame as adding resources against demands, outsourcing logistics, protecting family windows, and planning with partners ([P01], [P15]). Autonomy must be usable at the individual level to avoid COR loss spirals.

Cultural currents

The Israeli context couples strong family centrality with high professional ambition, raising stakes on both sides ([P02], [P08]). These dynamics echo analyses of how ideal-worker assumptions are gendered (Acker, 1990). Men’s planned co-ownership of care ([P18]) signals a gradual shift in what “good work” looks like at home and at work.

Organizational structures

When work happens it is a design choice. Temporal structuring research shows teams “make” time via routines (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002). “The Israel–U.S. overlap is the sharpest stressor: late-evening overlap was common and unsustainable for some” ([P04]). Predictable overlap and rota fairness share the burden ([P16], [P19]). Evidence aligns with the mixed verdict on telework: autonomy helps, but coordination costs and connectivity load rise unless rules change (Allen, Golden and Shockley, 2015; Barley, Meyerson and Grodal, 2011; Mazmanian, Orlikowski and Yates, 2013). Communication norms are pivotal: without guardrails, evening channels become “shadow stand-ups,” the kind of risk flagged in right-to-disconnect reviews (Eurofound, 2023). When teams decouple credit from live presence, recorded demos, written kudos, sponsor-of-record rotations visibility no longer depends on being online at 22:00, consistent with enrichment logic.

Multifaceted intervention

A cross-level package works better than a single policy. At the individual level, teach schedule craftsmanship (visible calendar blocks, day-part swaps, explicit partner planning). At the cultural level, sponsor alternative networks and normalize co-ownership so evening caregiving is standard, not exceptional. At the organizational level, redesign cadence: mirrored ceremonies across time zones, rota audits for late hours, protected family bands with written exceptions, and async credit by default. To sustain this, operationalize a lightweight Temporal Equity Index from existing tools after-hours displacement, usable schedule control, rota fairness, and async share and publish it in retros alongside delivery metrics. This follows JD–R and COR: reduce avoidable demands, increase usable resources, and protect recovery.

Contributions and implications.

Conceptually, we extend integration with a temporal-equity lens that unites boundary fit, schedule control, connectivity load, and credit design. Empirically, we show how people have lived the arc from assumed separation and ideal-worker peak to pandemic shock and current integration within single careers. Practically, we specify low-cost routines any hybrid team can adopt and a simple measurement approach that makes time costs auditable.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper traced a move from talk of “work–life balance” to practices of work–life integration in high-tech. Classic theories help explain the shift: conflict and enrichment clarify why demands and resources cross role boundaries; boundary and border theories foreground fit; Job Demands–Resources and Conservation of Resources explain why autonomy and recovery matter when connectivity is constant. Against that backdrop, the interviews show what actually changed on the ground: hours remain high, but the pressure point is when work happens, who controls that timing, and who bears the family cost.

The core insight is a temporal equity lens. Integration succeeds when four conditions are in place at the same time: people have schedule control they can use without penalty; there is boundary fit between preferences and team routines; connectivity load is contained so evenings do not become “shadow stand-ups”; and credit is decoupled from live presence through artifacts like recorded demos and written kudos. Where these conditions hold, teams meet global coordination needs without taxing family life; where any one is missing, the time-zone burden and a presence premium reappear.

The interviews also surface how integration now looks in practice. Israeli–U.S. alignment pushes work into evenings or early mornings, yet predictable overlap windows and rotation of awkward hours make the burden visible and shareable. The mental load is long-running and operational, managed through outsourcing,

calendar blocks and explicit trade-offs rather than slogans. Some fathers describe planned co-ownership of care with time-shifting later work, signaling a quiet cultural shift. Finally, people use career design moves, temporary step-backs, track switches, or seasonality to sustain participation without derailing growth.

Conceptually, the contribution is to recast integration as governing time and recognition, not just space. Empirically, the study documents how workers have lived multiple regimes, assumed separation, ideal-worker peak, the “golden cage,” balance pushback, pandemic shock, and integration within single careers. Practically, it points to low-cost routines any team can adopt: explicit protected bands, mirrored ceremonies across time zones, rota audits for late hours, and default async credit mechanisms.

The study is limited to Israeli high-tech and relies on self-reported experience; transferability to other sectors and countries should be tested. Future work should operationalize and validate simple temporal equity measures (after-hours load, usable schedule control, rota fairness, share of async recognition) against outcomes such as retention, promotion and well-being, and examine how different return-to-office designs interact with team cadence and boundary fit over time.

In short, the path from balance to integration is practical rather than rhetorical. When time and credit are managed deliberately, the same total hours generate less conflict and more durable careers.

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