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# Motivators of Knowledge Workers to Conduct Digital Detox

Short Paper

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## Abstract

*A great deal of time spent with information and communication technologies (ICT) makes knowledge workers especially susceptible to technostress. In this regard, the concept of digital detox has emerged to describe a strategic and periodic disengagement with ICT. Whereas extant research has put emphasis on untangling the characteristics and effects of digital detox, we do not know what motivators underly this practice other than the more general notion of technostress. Therefore, this study undertakes a qualitative approach with 10 phenomenological interviews to identify motivators of digital detox in knowledge work. The interview results culminate in a typology of individual digital detox motivators. We contribute to the theorization of digital detox by linking different types of motivators (prevention/coping/performance/physiological reboot) to digital detox and its effects on the experience of technostress. Implications for the design of digital detox policies that match with the motivations of knowledge workers can be derived.*

**Keywords:** Digital detox, technostress, knowledge work, ICT

## Introduction

The widespread implementation of information and communication technologies (ICT) in organizations has permanently changed business processes, structures, and the interaction between employees (Harris et al. 2021). This digital transformation of work has the potential to speed up communication and multiplies the possibilities of employees to make connections among each other (Baptista et al. 2020). This shift particularly affects knowledge workers, who can be defined as “workers whose input is knowledge resources to yield knowledge-based intellectual output” (Kianto et al. 2019, p. 179). In recent years, many knowledge workers have indulged in practices that involves working remotely. Thus, the dependence on ICT to communicate and collaborate with co-workers is increasing (Molino et al. 2020).

The flipside of this flexibility through intensified use of ICT are new demands such as high availability expectations for employees, that, if not effectively managed, can create technostress (Tarafdar et al. 2019). Although related research streams such as IT consumerization, bring-your-own-device, or work-from-home may be related to dark sides of ICT use, we embed this work in the growing literature on technostress. The latter can occur through “an individual’s attempts to deal with constantly evolving ICTs and the

*changing physical, social, and cognitive responses demanded by their use.*" (Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008, p. 417f). It is said to negatively affect subjective well-being, that is, the phenomenological and conscious experience as well as reflections on (dis-)satisfaction with certain life-domains (Henriques et al. 2014). Moreover, technostress has been found to implicate peril concerning job satisfaction and performance (Mirbabaie et al. 2022a; Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008), which makes it a relevant problem to be addressed by Information Systems (IS) research. Recent work in IS has found that remote work arrangements during the Covid-19 pandemic have increased the levels of technostress among knowledge workers and the negative consequences associated with it (Dey et al. 2020; Ioannou et al. 2022).

To counteract technostress, organizations can take measures to support their employees in a three-fold manner: (1) informing and educating employees about coping strategies to deal with technostress, (2), identifying fit between employees and different forms of such technostress coping strategies, and (3) encouraging employees to develop personal strategies to handle technostress (Tarafdar et al. 2020). The third measure can be realized with digital detox (Eichner 2020), a concept which has found its way in recent IS scholarship (e.g., Mirbabaie et al. 2022b; Syvertsen and Enli 2019). During a digital detox, individuals consciously take a break from ICT to avoid or recover from (techno-)stress and overload (Syvertsen and Enli 2019). Mirbabaie et al. (2022b) propose that digital detox can be used not only as a coping strategy but also preventively by knowledge workers to avoid the emergence of technostress. Digital detox is adaptable to one's special needs and therefore enables employees to develop appropriate strategies individually (Jiang and Balaji 2021). However, organization are advised to encourage their employees to do so and provide resources and training (Tarafdar et al. 2020). In contrast to one-size-fits-all strategies, individual digital detox strategies of knowledge workers require self-regulation skills and motivation. The existing scholarly debate presumes that coping with technostress is one motivation to conduct digital detox (Mirbabaie et al. 2022b). However, we do not know what other motivators might be present when digital detoxing, how work and private ICT use contribute to the decision to conduct digital detox, and why research has been producing so many mixed results concerning the effectiveness of digital detox (Schmuck 2020; Wilcockson et al. 2019). A better understanding of digital detox motivators is not only beneficial for moving forward in this research stream in IS, but also help organizations and knowledge workers, to develop better policies and use patterns line with their motivation to take strategic breaks from ICT. Hence, this paper aims to answer the following research question:

**RQ:** *What are motivators for knowledge workers to conduct digital detox?*

To answer this research question, we conducted phenomenological interviews with 10 knowledge workers who regularly perform digital detox. We chose a phenomenological approach because this allows us to study the phenomenon as experienced from the first-person view of the research subject (Creswell 2007), and to deliberately extract the motivators of knowledge workers' digital detox practices from the interviews. In this short paper, we present preliminary results and an interpretation of these 10 interviews, which aim to answer our research question. By doing so, we contribute to the current debate on digital detox in IS, which heavily builds on the technostress literature. We use the motivators unearthed in this study to extend a theoretical model of organizational technostress and incorporate the role and mechanism of digital detox. This theoretical contribution helps to better conceptualize digital detox in organizations and anchors it in existing technostress theory. Practical implications can be derived as our study informs organizations how to craft digital detox policies and how knowledge workers can be empowered to use ICT sustainably.

## **Theoretical Background**

### ***Emergence and Consequences of Technostress at Work***

Most technostress literature we find in IS scholarship builds on the transactional model of stress (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). According to this model, individuals evaluate the motivational relevance of a stimuli in a situation as a first step (primary appraisal). In the case of organizational technostress, job characteristics, technological, organizational, and social environments can evoke such stimuli (Tarafdar et al. 2015). As a result of the evaluation, individuals can perceive the stimuli as irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Then, the individual thinks about possible actions to handle the situation (secondary appraisal). The perceived stressors in the situation in turn trigger a stress response, which can be physiological, emotional, cognitive, or behavioral in nature (strain). In the case of technostress, the stressors can be, among others, in form of techno-invasion (constant accessibility,

blurring boundaries between work and personal life) and techno-overload (technology urging employees to work more and faster) (Tarafdar et al. 2015). Although there are others, these two are the techno-stressors knowledge workers are most affected by (Pflügner et al. 2020). Ultimately, technostress can impair the wellbeing of individuals through emotional and/or physical consequences. To cope with technostress, an individual can adopt either an emotion-focused or a problem-focused strategy (Pflügner et al. 2021). For the former, the goal is to reduce negative feelings by changing the first or second appraisal of the situation. The latter aims to change the circumstances in a stressful situation.

In the workplace, technostress does not only affect individual wellbeing, but can also adversely affect performance, and IT user satisfaction (Adam et al. 2017; Schmitt et al. 2021). Burnout and psychological behavioral disorders were identified as negative effects in the work of La Torre et al. (2019) and both techno-overload and techno-invasion were associated with greater turnover intention higher work-family conflict (Harris et al. 2021). To counter technostress, organizations can design specific policies on what terms communication is facilitated after hours and through which channels (Boswell et al. 2016). Recent research findings show that employees increasingly use self-designed emotion-based coping strategies to counteract technostress (Tarafdar et al. 2020). One increasingly researched concept in this realm is digital detox, which offers strategies of coping with and preventing technostress (Mirbabaie et al. 2022b).

### ***Digital Detox in the Context of Knowledge Work***

In recent years, digital detox has gained popularity in both popular culture and (IS) scholarship (e.g., Mirbabaie et al. 2022b). Syvertsen and Enli (2019) define digital detox as a "*periodic disconnection from social or online media, or strategies to reduce digital media involvement*" (p.1). Following Radtke et al. (2021), we view digital detox not only as a radical switching-off of all devices but rather as strategies that aim at a regulated and balanced use of ICT. In that sense, digital detox can vary in its execution regarding the dimension of time (breaks, appointments, off-work hours, constantly), the dimension of components (devices, applications), and the extent to which it interferes with organizational processes.

Recent research drew on the transactional model of technostress to explain how digital detox can reduce technostress (Mirbabaie et al. 2022b). Digital detox may be incorporated into the model to represent both coping and prevention strategies. For coping, digital detox can be used after an individual experienced technostress. For prevention, digital detox can be an upstream element prior to the first occurrence of stimuli to prevent the occurrence of stress (Stäheli and Stoltenberg 2022). Digital detox encompasses problem-focused strategies and emotion-focused strategies that we know from the technostress literature and organizes them across the dimensions of time, components, and interference (Mirbabaie et al. 2022b).

Researchers examined possible effects of digital detox measures in an organizational context. It has been shown that digital detox interventions can lead to an increase in individual performance among employees (Basu 2019). The results presented by Mirbabaie et al. (2022a) suggest that digital detox can be a promising tool for knowledge workers to control ICT demands. However, detrimental effects of digital detox strategies could be demonstrated as well (Pflügner et al. 2020). Employees report that the shutdown of email servers after work reduced feelings of techno-invasion, but increased feelings of techno-overload, as employees receive all emails at once at a later stage. Furthermore, this measure may lead to a slowing down of work processes and less flexibility. Overall, for the effectiveness of digital detox, it is crucial that individuals decide voluntarily and intentionally how they conduct it, as individuals' intentions and motivations are a key variable for a successful behavior change (Hardcastle et al. 2015). Here, we build on Ajzen's (1991) view on 'intentions', which "*are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence a behavior*" (p.181).

In this paper, we build on Mirbabaie et al.'s (2022b) model of digital detox in organizations. According to the authors, possible dimensions of motivation in this context are (1) coping or prevention and (2) the distinction between organizational policies and individual actuation. The model itself is based on Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Adam et al. (2017). With this work, we aim to contribute to the model by adding a theoretical lens on motivational components to better understand digital detox.

### **Research Design**

As the goal of this study is to identify motivators of knowledge workers to conduct digital detox, we employ a qualitative phenomenological approach. This approach goes back to the work of Husserl, who proposed

phenomenology as an alternative philosophical discipline and method (Padilla-Díaz 2015). It tries to establish similarities and differences of participants' experiences concerning a distinct phenomenon (Creswell 2007). The phenomenological method is well-suited to help answering our research question, because it focusses on constructing a description of a universal essence over all the explanations of the participants. Moreover, the phenomenological approach we follow is open and follows an inductive logic, which allows us to potentially discover hitherto unknown motivators. The selection of participants is purposeful and is limited to knowledge workers that have experienced the phenomenon.

### ***Procedure of Phenomenological Interviews***

The interviews were prepared in an open-structured fashion because this approach favors the inclusion of new questions and allowed us to iteratively improve the interview technique (Guerrero-Castañeda et al. 2017). An open-structured approach means that the interviewer makes use of a guidance-sheet, which does not affect the dynamic possibilities of the interviewer to ask questions they come up with on the spot and as they see fit with the participant. This also ensures all relevant parts of interest in the topic are addressed and helps to grasp the essence of the participants experience in an all-embracing manner. The guidance sheet covered the topics digital detox (motivation, strategy, consequences), and technostress (stressors, consequences, causes), and the distinction of it (if any) for private and professional life. The start of the interview focuses on the experiences and actions of the participant to carry and orientate the interview. For our purpose, the interview starts with the following sentence: „Please tell us about a situation or a time in your life where you conducted digital detox“. Further, a description of the procedure and an agreement towards a definition of digital detox were established to achieve a common ground with the participant. After finishing the interview, the researcher transcribed the interview ad verbatim (Giorgi and Giorgi 2003).

### ***Sample Selection Criteria and Final Draw***

For our sample, two inclusion criteria were derived. Participants (1) have previously conducted a digital detox as defined by Syvertsen and Enli (2019) and (2) qualify as knowledge workers (Kianto et al. 2019). Together, the criteria ensure that participants have experience with digital detox and regular ICT use. For this research-in-progress, our sample size consists of 10 interviews with knowledge workers from different working contexts to derive first insights into the research subject. The interviewees were recruited via personal contacts, social media groups focusing on and discussing digital detox as well as snowball-recruiting. To ensure compliance with the inclusion criteria, we checked whether the participants meet the requirements in order to participate when contacting them for the first time. The interviews were conducted by two researchers individually. Digital communication tools such as *Zoom* or *Google Meet* were used. The list of demographic data of the interviewees can be seen in Table 1.

<b>ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Job-Description</b>	<b>Length</b>
P1	Female	29	Editor (lifestyle magazines)	20 minutes
P2	Female	26	Corporation developer	20 minutes
P3	Female	29	Customer manager	22 minutes
P4	Female	23	Theatre educator	27 minutes
P5	Male	32	Software developer	17 minutes
P6	Male	28	Expert advisor	28 minutes
P7	Female	34	Theatre educator	20 minutes
P8	Male	26	Scientific employee	26 minutes
P9	Female	33	Editor and press-worker	21 minutes
P10	Female	28	Governmental employee for Prosecution	17 minutes

**Table 1. Demographic Data and Interview Length**

### ***Data Analysis***

To analyze the interview data, we used the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as described by Smith and Osborn (2007). The approach itself is hermeneutical as well as interpretative. This means that its point of view accepts the subjective sense-making of the participant and the interpretation of the

researcher, which therefore makes the methodology a double hermeneutic process. The IPA starts with reading the transcript of one case repeatedly and establishing meaning units (1). Those meaning units are commented by the researcher to gather more context within the explanation of the participant, enhancing contradictions, amplifications, or differences. The commented meaning units can be reformulated into themes, which reflect the researchers understanding. In our case, the meaning unit “I have somehow minimized external stimuli in order to be able to focus more strongly” (P8) would lead to the theme “Better focus”. Subsequently, the derived themes are analytically ordered into greater clusters (2). Additional themes may come up as superordinate concepts or come together with existing ones. Revalidating the clusters by examining the transcript again is done afterwards. The clusters are ordered coherently and equipped with examples. In our example, the derived theme “better focus” is grouped together with the topic “productive work” into the cluster “Improving performance”. The analysis is continued with other cases to establish new clusters and to enhance already existing ones (3). Finally, the clusters are reduced and reinspected in which the themes are tested around their prevalence and contribution to the researched phenomenon. Clusters that do not contribute to the research question can be dropped or examined again. This step of combining the findings from each interview was done by two researchers. This process was especially crucial for the correct depiction of statements from the different interviews and participants to exactly enhance the meaning of each expressed experience. As the last step, the phenomenon is formulated by not only presenting the clusters that emerged but also describing a clear picture of it (4). Step 1-3 were mostly done individually. Two revision-meetings involving two researchers were performed with the goal to differentiate the meaning of every cluster and theme. The researchers discussed the suggestions each one made with the goal to explain the context of the statements and to differentiate the meaning of every cluster and theme. This comparison ensured that the themes were created equally and reliable. Another revision after step 4 was made after the finished process of the individual analysis of all transcripts with the goal of a finished list of motivators which grasps the essence over all interviews.

## Preliminary Results

The analysis revealed six motivators of knowledge workers to conduct digital detox which will be presented one by one.

**Coping with overload.** The first motivator *coping with overload* is characterized by participants feeling overwhelmed by work-related information, communication and screentime as P5 expresses by stating: “When I sit at the computer for 8 hours a day, I’m always happy when I can turn it off [...] in the evening”. Also, participants feel overwhelmed by too much communication: “[...] the whole day the mails have somehow pinged, then the messenger has jumped on, and one had to constantly be in calls [...]” (P3). Additionally, receiving a lot of information can be stressful for workers and is perceived as “[...] a burden [that] is never ending” (P7). In sum, the motivator coping with overload shows the need to deal with and to process a great amount of information, communication, and screentime.

**Prevention of overload.** *Prevention of overload* forms a motivator that shows the intention to conduct digital detox even before negative consequences of the ICT overload occur: “It was practically a preventative measure, so I knew that I was in for a stressful phase, and that I definitely had to be very focused” (P2). The participants developed strategies to prevent being stressed by ICT overload. For example, P5 turned off work-related push-notifications during the day (“I now regularly set a timer and simply switch the notification to mute [...] that at least this ping is no longer so omnipresent”). The other way around, P3 limits private communication during work and uses breaks to check private messages: “During my lunch break, I usually turn on my cell phone for a few minutes and check to see who’s texting been [...]”. In general, the motivator prevention of overload shows the prevention of an unwanted amount of incoming communication attempts.

**Coping with invasion.** Participants showed a clear intention to conduct digital detox to achieve a separation of their work and private life which can be seen in the cluster *coping with invasion*. The invasion between work and private life is reported by, for example, P5: “If you [...] are permanently available for work-related activities, you realize relatively quickly that work takes a very, very large share of your private life”. Such invasion can lead to negative consequences as P3 reported: “I was on vacation, and she wrote to me all the time] and that’s when I really noticed how much it stressed me out.” Thus, participants aim to find ways to facilitate work-life-balance. Moreover, the motivator contains a more passive invasion of work-related content where the usage of private accounts interferes with content or accounts from work

as P9 states: *"the private surfing and being online, is little bit concated with the work-related"*. This motivates the conduction of digital detox which aims to reduce the feeling of work-related content invading private life.

**Prevention of invasion.** This motivator aims to prevent the boundaries between private life and work to blur. The interviewees explain the preventive motivation to make a straight line between work- and private related contents in the first place: *"I try not to expose myself to this stress in the first place"*. P5 describes the process of prevention more detailed: *"So that I am not disturbed by my private life, just as I mute the notifications from work on my cell phone and computer in the evening. So that I am not disturbed in private by work things"* (P5). This cluster in general shows a different approach of digital detox where the motivation of conduction is coupled with estimated negative outcomes of ICT, so a preventative digital detox is done in the first place.

**Improving performance.** Achieving better performance with digital detox is a motivator that has been reported multiple times. Participants aim to better focus during work: *"[...] what I do, I do somehow more intense and somehow with more deepness [...]"* (P1), and: *"I have somehow minimized external stimuli to be able to focus more strongly"* (P8). Also, participants reported that they aim to improve their performance by working more effectively by letting themselves get less distracted. P10 clearly pointed that out with the expression *"[...] I actually feel much better, and I am more productive at work."*. The cluster *improving performance* shows the intention to enhance the focus and productiveness with a digital detox.

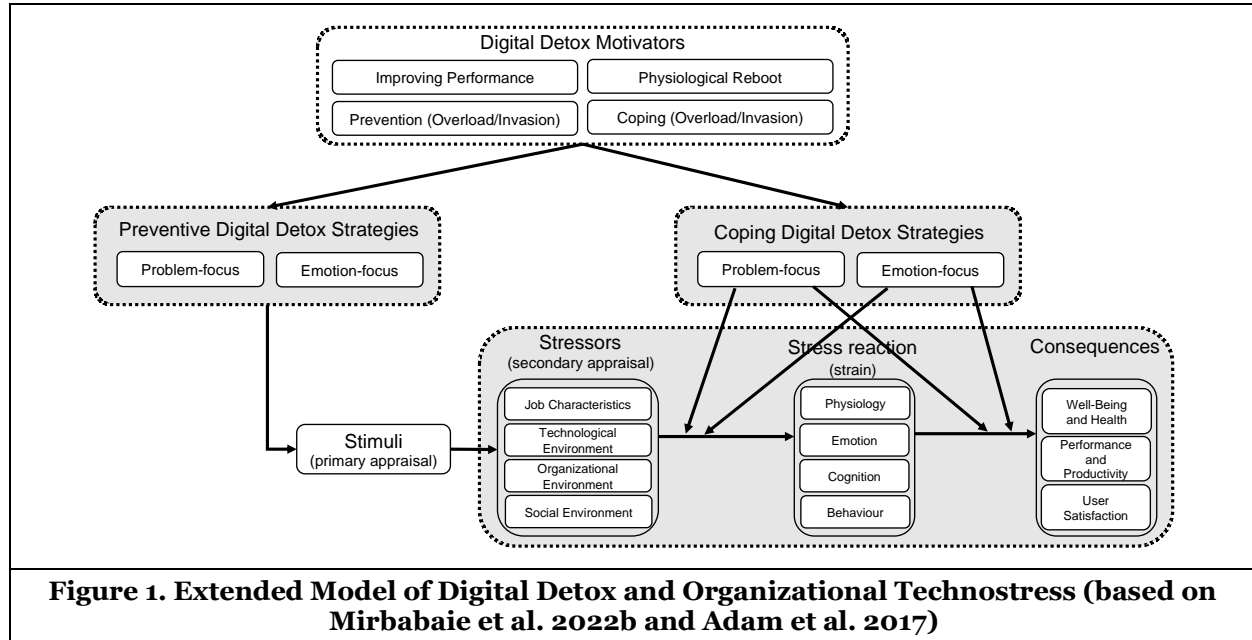
**Physiological reboot.** The motivation to conduct digital detox can also be bound to the intention to reduce the effects of physical reactions induced by stress, which we refer to as *physiological reboot*. This motivator refers to decreased physical wellbeing due to ICT use such as exhaustion, bad sleep, abdominal pain, sweating, and tired eyes: *"[...] when I have stress, it becomes a bit physical, and I notice that I quickly have physical symptoms [...]"* (P3). This cluster is only represented with statements from three participants. What all those statements have in common is not just the experience of physical symptoms of different stressors but also that their roots lie in the stress induction through the working context.

## Discussion

This research aimed to provide an overview of knowledge workers' motivators for performing digital detox. Six motivators were identified, which vary in the coping or prevention intentions with regards to negative side-effects of ICT use. It is noticeable that oftentimes the implementation of digital detox was not based on a single motivator, but rather a combination of different motivators as reasons for a digital detox. Thus, the results suggests that multiple motivators can operate in parallel and that individuals can have different reasons for conducting digital detox at the same time. Furthermore, it can be reported that the motivators found correspond to negative effects of excessive ICT use or positive effects of abstinence from ICT. This shows that the decision to conduct digital detox does not take place arbitrarily and that effects of the use and non-use of ICT that have been experienced also function as motivators.

Our results confirm existing findings as feelings of techno-overload can arise due to an overwhelming number of messages, demands, and information (Harris et al. 2021). Within this study, participants indicated coping with techno-overload as an important stressor that triggers digital detox. We found that digital detox is used on the one hand to cope with existing feelings of overload and, on the other hand, to prevent potentially emerging feelings of such kind. Pflügner et al. (2020) developed measures that can lead to a reduction of feelings of techno-invasion. They mentioned the regulation of after-work business device usage e-mail traffic as effective ways to reduce employees' feelings of constant availability. These measures were also implemented by subjects of this study to counteract or prevent feelings of techno-invasion. Some subjects reported that they not only turned away from ICT the moment they experienced such feeling, but also preventively removed work devices in their free time to protect themselves from negative feelings and stress. The motivators behind these strategies are feelings of invasion and prevention of invasion. In this context, social norms and normative response pressure are often related to technostress (Pflügner 2022) and were also frequently mentioned in the interviews. These terms describe the pressure to respond promptly to incoming e-mails and messages based on norms or social agreements. Pressure to respond is closely related to the motivators "feelings of invasion" and "prevention of invasion" where people try to avoid the pressure to reply to work related messages in their free time.

With regard to the motivation of the participants to improve their performance through digital detox, existing research shows that technostress can have a negative impact on job performance (Tarafdar et al. 2019) and that digital detox can counteract this (Mirbabaie et al. 2022a). Intentions to focus better and work more productively were common reasons for digital detox among the interviewees, whereby the discussed literature provides empirical evidence for the effectiveness of digital detox in terms of gaining higher performance. Previous research also showed that temporarily removing ICT reduces the experience of physiological strain (Anrijs et al. 2018). Reducing physical reactions has been identified as another digital detox motivator by some subjects. This can partly be explained with excessive ICT use and a particularly low resilience to technostress on the part of the subjects concerned. Figure 1 shows how the identified digital detox motivators theoretically relate to technostress coping and prevention.



Mirbabaie et al. (2022b) divided the motivation for implementing digital detox into individual and organizational motivations. In this study, participants reported individual motivators as they have not experienced situations in which their employing organization implemented measures to support digital detox. In terms of individual motivators, however, this study can contribute a distinction among motivators with respect to the intention of using digital detox as a coping or prevention strategy. While most motivators occurred in response to a specific stressful experience, some subjects reported an intention to prevent potential future stress by performing digital detox, mirrored in the motivator prevention of technostress. When having experienced stress in certain situations in the past and when the subjects knew that they would be in a similar situation soon, they tried to prevent the expected stress with digital detox before the emergence of a stress experience. A decisive aspect here seemed to be the effectiveness of digital detox as a coping strategy observed in previous situations which lead them using digital detox as a prevention strategy. Theoretically, this leads to the unique finding that to the circuit of technostress as depicted in Figure 1 can not only be entered through different paths (coping or prevention), but that this path can shift from an initial coping motivation to a subsequent prevention motivation. The extended model shows the identified motivators and mechanisms that underly the conduct of digital detox.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

This short paper identified six motivators of knowledge workers to conduct digital detox by analyzing the results of ten phenomenological interviews with knowledge workers. The findings contribute to theory by extending the model of organizational technostress by adding digital detox motivators that precede the individual decision for strategic action. Moreover, we found that the motivation to conduct digital detox can switch from coping to prevention in case individuals experienced a positive effect they assign to one or more coping strategies. Practical implications can be derived from this study as it shows why knowledge workers



reduce or interrupt their engagement with ICT. This theoretical knowledge can be translated to organizational measures, policies, and incentives that facilitate the conduct of digital detox to prevent and cope with technostress among employees.

Our next steps will be to conduct additional interviews until we reach a point of saturation. With the additional interviews we will manifest the already found motivators and find differences in their importance. Also, the interviews will help us to detect possible new motivators. This will help us to holistically understand what motivates knowledge workers to do a digital detox. One limitation of the study is that the average of the participating knowledge workers was rather young ( $M = 28.5$ ). Therefore, we will acquire participants of higher age for our next interviews to ensure more breadth in the sample. Out of the 10 conducted interviews, seven were female, thus, we will ensure a more balanced gender distribution by interviewing more males. Additionally, further research should incorporate the managerial view and measures organizations (can) take to motivate knowledge workers to conduct digital detox and how this adds to our theoretical understanding of the relationship between digital detox and technostress.

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