
FEELING OVERWORKED: WHEN WORK BECOMES TOO MUCH

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, interest in how much and how hard Americans work has escalated. Studies explore work pressures and work hours and how these factors affect employees' behavior, their views about their jobs, their health, and their personal and family lives. Yet almost no one has come right out and asked employees to what extent they *feel overworked* or systematically explored how these feelings are linked to work experiences, job performance, and personal and family life. This critical gap in our knowledge was the impetus for our study.

Although our definition of feeling overworked draws on the research literature and the counsel of experts, it has been most influenced by talking with and listening to employees. Ultimately, we selected three related questions to define the degree to which employees feel overworked: How often do you feel overworked? How often do you feel overwhelmed by how much work has to be done? How often do you feel there is not enough time to step back and process or reflect on your work?

In this study, we address the following general issues:

- How prevalent is feeling overworked?
- What aspects of jobs contribute to feeling overworked?
- Who is most likely to feel overworked?
- How is feeling overworked related to job performance? Personal and family relations? Employee stress and health?

The findings of the study are relevant to employers, employees, policy makers, and work-life researchers. We make a special effort to draw out the implications for employers in the final section of the report.

THE STUDY

Data for the study were obtained from telephone interviews with a representative national sample of 1,003 adults (18 or older) who work for pay and are employed by someone other than themselves in their main (or only) job for any number of hours per week. Researchers at Families and Work Institute developed the interview questionnaire based on a literature review, consultation with experts in the field and business leaders, and focus groups with employees. Harris Interactive drew the national sample and conducted the interviews by telephone. All differences and associations reported here are statistically significant.

HOW PERVASIVE IS FEELING OVERWORKED?

Feeling overworked is a psychological state that has the potential to affect attitudes, behavior, social relationships, and health both on and off the job. Information from our focus groups suggested that feeling overworked is often an **acute** condition, which may largely subside once work demands decrease, rather than a **chronic** condition—though for some employees it is clearly an ever-present feeling. Three closely related questions were used to measure how often employees felt overworked (*very often*, *often*, *sometimes*, *rarely*, or *never*) in the past three months. For the sample as a whole we found that:

- 28% of employees "felt overworked" *often* or *very often* in the past three months;
- 28% felt "overwhelmed by how much work they had to do" *often* or *very often* in the past three months; and
- 29% felt that they "didn't have the time to step back and process or reflect on the work they're doing" *often* or *very often* during the past three months.

Moreover, we found that nearly half (46%) of U.S. employees responded *often* or *very often* to at least one of these questions, while only 24% said they *rarely* or *never* experienced any of these three feelings.

If we broaden our perspective to include employees who felt overworked at least *sometimes* during the preceding three months, the proportions who feel overworked increase substantially:

- 54% felt overworked at least *sometimes* in the past three months;
- 55% felt overwhelmed by how much work they had to do at least *sometimes* in the past three months; and
- 59% felt they did not have time to step back and process or reflect on the work they were doing at least *sometimes* in the past three months.

We also created an overall index of feeling overworked by averaging answers to the three questions above. On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1=*never* and 5=*very often*), U.S. employees have an average score of 2.7, suggesting that the average employee *sometimes* feels overworked. Employees with average scores **above** *sometimes*, might be viewed as feeling chronically overworked. Employees in this group are classified as experiencing **high levels** of feeling overworked in subsequent analyses.

WHAT ASPECTS OF JOBS CONTRIBUTE TO FEELING OVERWORKED?

Feeling overworked is associated with many different aspects of employees' jobs and workplaces. We briefly summarize the main findings in the following section.

Amount of work, preferences, control, and reasons for working more

- Employees who work more paid and unpaid **hours** per week at their main/only jobs feel more overworked: On average, employees work 41.2 hours per week; 45% of employees working 50 or more hours per week experience high levels of feeling overworked versus only 6% of those working fewer than 20 hours per week.
- Employees who work more hours than they would **prefer**—however many hours they actually work—also feel more overworked: On average, employees would prefer to work 34.5 hours per week; 44% of those who work more hours than they would like to work experience high levels of feeling overworked versus 26% of those who do not want to work fewer hours.
- Employees who work more **days** per week at their main/only jobs feel more overworked: 44% of employees working 6 or 7 days per week experience high levels of feeling overworked versus 33% of those working 5 days per week, and 27% of those working 1–4 days per week.
- Employees who work more days than they would **prefer**—however many days they actually work—also feel more overworked: 43% of those who work more days per week than they would like to work experience high levels of feeling overworked versus 24% of those who do not want to work fewer days.
- Employees who work longer hours or more days than they prefer for **external reasons** (i.e., factors other than personal motivation) feel more overworked. For example, 53% of employees who *agree somewhat* or *strongly* that they work more than desired because their "employer expects them to work long hours" have high levels of feeling overworked, while only 28% of those who *somewhat* or *strongly disagree* that they work more because of employer expectations experience high levels of feeling overworked. However, **personal** or **financial reasons** for working more—such as "to advance at my job" or "to buy things I need"—are not associated with feeling overworked.
- Employees who believe they cannot change their work schedule so that they can work the hours or days they prefer feel more overworked: 45% of those who say they cannot change their work schedules to be able to work their preferred hours experience high levels of feeling overworked versus 33% of those who can change their work schedules.

Pressures and distractions on the job

- Nine out of ten (90%) of employees *agree somewhat* or *strongly* that they experience one or more of these pressures at work:
 - My job requires that I work very fast;
 - My job requires that I work very hard; or
 - I never have enough time to get everything done on my job.

Those who experience greater pressure on the job feel much more overworked. For example: 56% of employees who *agree somewhat* or *strongly* that they "never seem to have enough time to get everything done" experience high levels of feeling overworked

versus only 13% of those who *somewhat* or *strongly disagree* that they have never have enough time to get everything done.

- Three out of five (60%) of employees say they *often* or *very often* experience one or more of these problems when trying to focus on their jobs:
 - Have difficulty focusing on the work they have to do;
 - Experience work interruptions; or
 - Have to work on too many tasks at the same time.

Employees who have more difficulty focusing at work feel much more overworked. For example, 45% of employees feel that they have to multi-task too much (*often* or *very often*). And 56% of those who *often* or *very often* "work on too many tasks at the same time" experience high levels of feeling overworked versus only 16% who report that they *sometimes*, *rarely* or *never* work on too many tasks.

Technology and accessibility

- Four in ten employees (41%) *often* or *very often* use technology (cellular/mobile phones, beepers, pagers, computers, email, fax) for their jobs during typical nonwork hours or days, and those who use technology more frequently feel more overworked: 38% of employees who say they *often* or *very often* use technology for their jobs during nonwork time experience high levels of feeling overworked versus 29% of employees who *rarely* or *never* use technology for their jobs during nonwork time.
- About one-fifth (22%) of employees say they *often* or *very often* have to be accessible to their employers during typical nonwork hours and nonwork days, while 30% say they *never* have to be accessible. Employees who are more accessible (by whatever means) to their employers during nonwork hours and days feel more overworked: 41% of those who say they have to be accessible to their employers *often* or *very often* during nonwork time report high levels of feeling overworked versus 31% of those who *rarely* or *never* have to be accessible.
- Employees who feel they are more accessible than necessary to their employers (23% of those who have to be accessible at least occasionally) feel much more overworked: 51% of those who feel they are unnecessarily accessible experience high levels of feeling overworked versus 32% of those who do not feel unnecessarily accessible.

Time off

- One-quarter of employees (25%) do not take all of the vacation to which they are entitled because of the demands of their jobs, and those who do not take all their vacation feel more overworked: 55% of employees who do not take all their vacation experience high levels of feeling overworked versus 27% who do use all of their vacation entitlement.

Internal labor market problems

- More than one in four employees (27%) reported that their organizations had eliminated jobs during the preceding year, and 37% said that their organizations had difficulty hiring. Those who work for companies that have downsized or have had difficulty hiring new employees feel more overworked. For example, 42% of those whose employers had difficulty hiring in the past year experienced high levels of feeling overworked versus 31% of those whose employers did not have difficulty hiring.

Job quality

- Employees who have poorer quality jobs—less job autonomy, more wasted time, fewer learning opportunities, less job security—feel more overworked. For example, 48% of employees who *somewhat* or *strongly agree* that they "spend a lot of time at work doing things that they think are a waste of time" experience high levels of feeling overworked versus 26% who *somewhat* or *strongly disagree* with this statement.

Workplace support

- Employees who have less supportive workplaces—inadequate materials and equipment to do a good job, inadequate support from people at work to do a good job, inadequate flexibility to manage work and family responsibilities, inadequate support from supervisors, and lack of respect—feel more overworked. For example, 51% of employees who *somewhat* or *strongly disagree* that they "have the flexibility in their work time to manage their personal and family responsibilities" report high levels of feeling overworked versus 29% of those who *somewhat* or *strongly agree* with the statement. In addition, 51% of employees who *somewhat* or *strongly disagree* that their "supervisor really cares about the effect that work demands have on their personal and family life" report high levels of feeling overworked versus 28% of those who *somewhat* or *strongly agree* with the statement.

DO DIFFERENT DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS FEEL MORE OR LESS OVERWORKED?

To address this question we compared men with women, older with younger employees, managers and professionals with employees in other occupations, and employees who have more family responsibilities with those who have fewer responsibilities.

Gender

Women feel more overworked than men. At first, this finding seems counterintuitive since men tend to work longer hours, are more accessible to their employers during non-

work time, are less likely to use all their vacation, and are more likely to have jobs with other characteristics that appear to contribute to feeling overworked than do women. In two important respects, however, women do report having more demanding jobs: On average, they report being interrupted more frequently while working and having too many tasks to do at the same time. When we compared men and women who experience these problems with the same frequency, the gender difference in feeling overworked disappeared.

This finding raises important questions: Do women experience more frequent interruptions and too much multi-tasking because of the specific types of jobs they have? Do the socialization experiences of women make them more vulnerable to interruptions and more likely to take on additional tasks?

Age

Baby Boomers (36–54) feel more overworked than Gen Xers/Millennials (18–35) and Mature Workers (55 and older). The fact that Baby Boomers work significantly longer hours and are more likely to prefer to work fewer hours than either younger or older employees helps to explain why they feel more overworked.

Occupational status

Although the study does not provide detailed information about occupations, it does distinguish between managerial or professional employees and employees in other occupations. Not surprisingly, managers and professionals feel more overworked than others. They work significantly longer hours than other employees and are more likely to prefer shorter hours.

Family responsibilities

Perhaps surprisingly, having children under 18, having children under 6, having elder care responsibilities, and having child care and elder care responsibilities at the same time are not—in themselves—associated with feeling more overworked. That is, the mere *presence* of more family responsibilities is not associated with feeling more overworked. What we do *not* know from this study is whether the actual amount of time employees spend on and their time preferences for *family work*—child care, elder care, and housework—are related to feeling overworked. However, we strongly suspect that they are. Moreover, we also suspect that differences between men and women with respect to primary responsibilities for family work might also help to explain why women feel more overworked than men.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN EMPLOYEES FEEL OVERWORKED?

This is the question of ultimate importance in this study. Does the fact that as many as *three in ten* employees feel chronically overworked matter? Does it create problems for employers or employees?

Work-related outcomes

The more overworked employees feel:

- The more likely they are to report making mistakes at work: 17% of employees reporting high levels of feeling overworked say they make mistakes at work *often* or *very often* versus only 1% of those who experience low levels of feeling overworked.
- The more likely they are to feel angry toward their employers for expecting them to do so much: 43% of employees experiencing high levels of feeling overworked say they feel angry toward their employers *often* or *very often* versus only 3% who experience low levels.
- The more likely they are to resent coworkers who do not work as hard as they do.
- The more likely they are to look for a new job with another employer: Almost half (49%) of employees experiencing high levels of feeling overworked say it is *somewhat* or *very likely* that they will seek employment elsewhere in the coming year versus only 30% who report low levels of feeling overworked.

Personal outcomes

The more overworked employees feel:

- The more work-life conflict they experience—conflict that may have negative effects on both family and work.
- The less successful they feel in relationships with their spouse or partner, children and friends.
- The more likely they are to be neglecting themselves: Only 41% of employees who experience high levels of feeling overworked say they are *very* or *extremely successful* in taking good care of themselves versus 66% of those reporting low levels of feeling overworked.
- The more likely they are to lose sleep because of their work.
- The less likely they are to report that their health is *very good* or *excellent*: 50% of employees experiencing high levels of feeling overworked describe their health as *very good* or *excellent* versus 64% of those reporting low levels of feeling overworked.
- The higher their levels of stress and the poorer their abilities to cope with everyday life events.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

These findings—both work-related and personal—have implications in four major areas of immediate concern to employers: safety in the workplace, job performance, employee retention, and health care costs.

Safety in the workplace

Making mistakes at work may mainly affect job performance among white-collar employees, but among blue-collar employees mistakes can result in serious injuries, workers' compensation claims, and other liabilities. Loss of sleep due to work that results in significant sleep deprivation also increases the likelihood of mistakes and serious accidents, as shown by other research.ⁱ

Although feeling angry toward one's employer for being expected to work so hard and feeling resentful toward one's coworkers who appear to be working less may mainly affect employees' morale and levels of stress (which is bad enough), there is also the possibility that employees will "act out" their anger and resentment in the workplace.

Job performance

All the consequences of feeling overworked listed above can affect job performance—the most obvious consequences being more frequent mistakes, greater work-life conflict, and poorer health. Employers should not assume that by getting the most work they can out of their employees, they will necessarily maximize productivity. Every employee appears to have a breaking point, a point at which work becomes too much.

Retention

Despite the recent flurry of layoffs, retaining valued employees remains a top priority of employers. When employees feel overworked, they are more likely to consider other job options with other employers. Employees who feel **chronically** overworked are, of course, the most likely to imagine a very different future—a less pressured job with another employer, scaling back the time they devote to paid work, or a more meaningful career.

Health care costs

Employees who feel more overworked tend to feel less successful in their relationships with spouses or partners, children, and friends; to neglect themselves; to lose sleep because of work; to feel less healthy; and to feel more stressed and less able to cope with everyday life. These symptoms are strongly associated with greater utilization of the health care system and with impaired performance on the job (or departure from the labor force entirely). Mental health problems and associated physical health problems appear to be increasing dramatically. According to the World Health

Organization, mental health problems are expected to become the second most common cause of disability and death by 2020.ⁱⁱ This implies higher health care costs for employers who subsidize health care insurance for their employees, as well as higher costs to families and society.

WHAT MIGHT BE DONE TO REDUCE THE FREQUENCY WITH WHICH EMPLOYEES FEEL OVERWORKED?

If one accepts the proposition that the psychological state of feeling overworked can have serious negative consequences for both employees **and** employers, it is obviously worth considering what might be done to prevent or reduce these feelings among workers.

Many of the job and workplace characteristics we examined that are associated with feeling more overworked are within the power of employers to change. More difficult, however, is finding a workable balance between organizational needs and employee needs, as well as rethinking long-held assumptions about how work gets done. Employers will likely draw different conclusions from our findings according to differences among their organizations and their personal views. In our work at the Families and Work Institute, we have observed that companies are already responding in different ways.

Some employers believe that pushing employees to do more and do it faster is the only way to remain competitive in the global economy. Of these, some will dismiss our findings and simply continue to push their employees to work harder and longer. Others may read the findings of this study and conclude that they can get the same or greater effort out of employees, for example, by providing more work schedule flexibility; after all, employees with greater flexibility to manage their personal and family lives do tend to feel less overworked. But if employers then expect even higher productivity, will greater flexibility really offset the negative effects of longer hours and more pressured jobs over the long run?

Still others may view our findings as an invitation to experiment with redesigning work to reduce wasted or low-value time at work, interruptions during the work day, or unnecessary demands. We have witnessed how some employers have addressed these issues so that employees can work more efficiently and get more done on the job. Yet, do such gains in efficiency mean that employees, if they so wish, will be able to spend less time on their jobs and more time on their personal and family lives? Potentially, but not necessarily.

Our findings strongly suggest that every employee reaches a point when increasing work demands simply become too much—a point at which personal and family relations, personal health, and the quality of work itself are seriously threatened. Today's 24/7 economy appears to be pushing many employees to and beyond that point.

ⁱ For examples, see National Sleep Foundation. (2000, March 28). *Sleeplessness taking toll on nation's workforce* [News release (poll)]; Peters, R. D., Kloeppe, Alicandri, E, Fox, E., Thomas, M. L, Thorne, D. R., Sing, H. C., and Balwinski, S. M. (1994). *Effects of partial and total sleep deprivation on driving performance*. Washington, DC: Federal Highway Administration.; Harrison, Y., Horne J. A., and Simpson, J. M. (2000). Impact of sleep deprivation on decision making: a review. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 6 (3), 236–249.

ⁱⁱ Harnois, G. & Gabriel, P. (2000). *Mental health and work*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization; Murray, C. J. L. & Lopez, A. D., eds. (1996). *The global burden of disease: A comprehensive assessment of mortality and disability from diseases, injuries, and risk factors in 1990 and projected to 2020*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard School of Public Health on behalf of the World Health Organization and The World Bank (Global Burden of Disease and Injury Series, Vol. 1).