The Effects of Workload on an Employee

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Introduction

Employee productivity depends not only on professional competence but also on workers' physical health, psychological well-being, motivation, and ability to recover from occupational demands. Every organization aims to generate sustainable revenue through the coordinated efforts of trained employees. However, some employers attempt to reduce operational costs by limiting staff numbers while assigning additional responsibilities to the employees who remain. Although such a strategy may reduce immediate labor expenses, it can create a workload that employees cannot sustain without experiencing exhaustion, dissatisfaction, or declining performance.

Employees may also accept excessive workloads voluntarily because they need overtime income, fear losing their jobs, want promotions, or feel responsible for supporting colleagues. In other cases, long working hours result from staff shortages, unrealistic deadlines, rapid organizational growth, poor planning, or a workplace culture that treats constant availability as evidence of commitment. Regardless of the cause, workload becomes harmful when occupational demands consistently exceed the time, energy, skills, and resources available to employees.

Heavy workloads affect more than the individual worker. They can increase absenteeism, presenteeism, staff turnover, interpersonal conflict, errors, workplace accidents, and healthcare costs. The International Labour Organization (2023) reports that more than one-third of workers worldwide regularly work over 48 hours per week, demonstrating that excessive working time is not an isolated organizational problem.

This essay argues that protecting employees from the negative effects of workload requires shared responsibility. Employees should adopt healthy behaviors, establish reasonable boundaries, and use restorative breaks. Nevertheless, employers must address the organizational conditions that create excessive demands. Physical exercise and active rest can reduce some effects of occupational stress, but they cannot compensate for chronic understaffing, unreasonable expectations, or a lack of managerial support.

Understanding Employee Workload

Employee workload refers to the amount and complexity of work that an individual must complete

within a specified period. It includes visible tasks, such as processing orders, attending meetings, writing reports, treating patients, or operating machinery. It also includes less visible demands, such as emotional labor, decision-making, workplace communication, problem-solving, digital monitoring, and the pressure to remain available outside normal working hours.

A high workload is not always harmful. Employees may find demanding work stimulating when they possess adequate skills, sufficient time, decision-making authority, supportive colleagues, and access to necessary resources. A temporary increase in work may even produce a sense of accomplishment. The danger arises when excessive demands become persistent and employees have little opportunity to rest, recover, or influence how their duties are organized.

The Job Demands–Resources model provides a useful framework for understanding this difference. Demerouti et al. (2001) classify workplace conditions into job demands and job resources. Job demands require sustained physical or psychological effort. Examples include long working hours, emotional pressure, heavy responsibilities, difficult clients, complex assignments, and strict deadlines. Job resources include managerial support, autonomy, appropriate equipment, constructive feedback, professional development, adequate staffing, and fair rewards.

According to the model, high job demands steadily consume employees' physical and mental energy. When those demands are not balanced by adequate resources, workers are more likely to experience exhaustion and disengagement. Resources do not necessarily eliminate demanding work, but they improve employees' ability to manage it. A demanding position accompanied by autonomy, recognition, social support, and sufficient recovery time is therefore different from a demanding position in which the employee has little control or assistance.

Basińska-Zych and Springer (2017) similarly explain that the consequences of work overload depend partly on the interaction between occupational demands, personal life, healthy behavior, and opportunities for recovery. Their analysis suggests that physical activity, sleep, supportive relationships, and work–life balance can help employees regenerate. However, such behaviors should be part of a broader organizational health culture rather than treated as substitutes for responsible workload management.

Major Causes of Excessive Workload

One common cause of excessive workload is understaffing. When employees resign, retire, become ill, or are dismissed, their duties may be distributed among the remaining workers. If the organization does not replace departing staff, a temporary arrangement can become a permanent source of overload. Employees may then complete the responsibilities of several positions without receiving additional time, authority, or compensation.

Unrealistic deadlines are another significant cause. Managers sometimes underestimate the time and concentration required to complete a project. They may promise rapid delivery to customers before

consulting the employees who must perform the work. This creates pressure to skip breaks, remain at work after normal hours, or take assignments home.

Poorly planned organizational growth can produce similar consequences. When sales, enrollment, production, or customer demand grows faster than staffing and infrastructure, employees face increasing responsibilities without corresponding resources. Technological systems can also contribute to overload. Although digital tools are intended to improve efficiency, constant emails, notifications, virtual meetings, and after-hours messages can fragment attention and blur the boundary between employment and private life.

Finally, workplace culture influences how workload is experienced. In some organizations, employees feel that refusing additional work will make them appear uncooperative. Workers who consistently accept extra assignments may become the first people managers approach whenever a new task appears. Over time, reliable employees can be penalized for their competence because their reward for completing work efficiently is receiving even more work.

Mental Health Consequences of Heavy Workload

One of the most immediate consequences of excessive workload is occupational stress. Stress occurs when employees believe that workplace demands exceed their ability or resources to manage them. A demanding day does not automatically cause lasting harm. However, repeated exposure without adequate recovery can keep the body and mind in a prolonged state of alertness.

Employees experiencing workload-related stress may become irritable, anxious, emotionally exhausted, or unable to concentrate. They may continue thinking about unfinished work after leaving the workplace, making genuine psychological detachment difficult. Sleep can also be disrupted when workers mentally rehearse workplace problems at night or worry about the following day.

A systematic review and meta-analysis by van der Molen et al. (2020) found that high job demands, effort–reward imbalance, and low organizational justice were among the psychosocial factors most strongly associated with stress-related mental disorders. Their findings are important because they demonstrate that employee distress cannot always be explained by personal weakness or inadequate coping. The way work is designed, distributed, rewarded, and supervised has measurable implications for mental health.

Chronic overload can eventually contribute to burnout. Burnout is generally characterized by severe exhaustion, psychological distance or cynicism toward work, and reduced professional effectiveness. An employee who was once enthusiastic may begin feeling detached, resentful, or emotionally numb. Tasks that were previously manageable may seem overwhelming because the worker’s psychological resources have been depleted.

Aronsson et al. (2017) reviewed evidence concerning working conditions and burnout symptoms.

They found that high demands, heavy workload, low control, insufficient reward, and job insecurity increased the risk of exhaustion, while workplace support and organizational justice could have protective effects. These findings reinforce the argument that preventing burnout requires organizational changes, not merely advice telling workers to become more resilient.

Physical Health Consequences

Excessive workload also affects physical health. When employees work long hours, they have less time for exercise, sleep, nutritious meals, medical appointments, and social activities. Sedentary employees may remain seated for extended periods, while employees in physically demanding occupations may repeatedly lift, bend, stand, or perform strenuous movements without sufficient recovery.

The cardiovascular consequences of long working hours are particularly concerning. A joint analysis by the World Health Organization and International Labour Organization estimated that long working hours contributed to 745,000 deaths from stroke and ischemic heart disease in 2016. Compared with working 35 to 40 hours per week, working at least 55 hours was associated with an estimated 35% higher risk of stroke and a 17% higher risk of death from ischemic heart disease (Pega et al., 2021).

The World Health Organization and International Labour Organization (2021) therefore warned that “working 55 hours or more per week is a serious health hazard” (para. 8). This statement highlights an important distinction: long working hours are not simply inconvenient. Sustained exposure can become an occupational health risk requiring action from employers, workers, and governments.

Several pathways may explain the association between excessive working time and cardiovascular disease. Persistent psychosocial stress activates physiological stress responses and may increase the release of stress hormones. Long working hours can also encourage harmful coping behaviors, including physical inactivity, irregular eating, smoking, or excessive alcohol consumption. In addition, employees who lack recovery time may continue working despite pain, illness, or extreme fatigue.

Physical exhaustion can also increase safety risks. A fatigued employee may respond more slowly, misjudge hazards, overlook important information, or make errors while operating equipment. These risks are especially serious in transportation, construction, healthcare, manufacturing, emergency services, and other occupations in which a momentary lapse can harm workers, customers, or members of the public.

Workload, Performance, and Organizational Productivity

Employers sometimes assume that assigning more work will automatically generate more output. This

assumption may be accurate for a brief period, but it becomes unreliable when demanding conditions continue. Employees can temporarily increase their effort to meet an urgent deadline. They cannot sustain maximum effort indefinitely without experiencing fatigue and declining concentration.

As workload increases, employees may begin rushing through assignments, postponing lower-priority duties, or reducing the attention given to quality. Errors then require correction, creating additional work and further increasing pressure. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle: overload causes mistakes, mistakes generate rework, and rework intensifies overload.

Heavy workloads can also create presenteeism, which occurs when employees attend work but perform below their normal capacity because of stress, illness, pain, or exhaustion. Presenteeism may be difficult for managers to detect because the employee is physically present. Nevertheless, the organization loses productivity when workers struggle to concentrate, communicate, make decisions, or complete tasks accurately.

In addition, employees who believe that workloads are unfairly distributed may reduce their voluntary contributions. They may stop helping colleagues, suggesting improvements, or participating actively in workplace initiatives. Some eventually search for employment elsewhere. When experienced workers leave, the organization loses institutional knowledge and must invest in recruitment and training. Their departure can also place additional pressure on those who remain.

Productivity should therefore be understood as sustainable, high-quality performance rather than the largest possible number of hours worked. The International Labour Organization (2023) concludes that reduced working hours and flexible arrangements can improve work–life balance while benefiting both workers and employers.

Effects on Family and Social Relationships

Excessive workload does not remain within the workplace. Employees carry fatigue, frustration, and unfinished responsibilities into their personal lives. A worker who regularly arrives home late may have little energy for childcare, household duties, friendships, education, or community participation. Even when physically present, the employee may remain mentally occupied with emails, deadlines, or workplace problems.

Work–family conflict occurs when the demands of employment interfere with personal and family responsibilities. It can also operate in the opposite direction when family demands affect work. However, organizations have substantial influence over work-to-family conflict because they determine schedules, staffing levels, leave arrangements, and expectations concerning after-hours availability.

Basińska-Zych and Springer (2017) argue that positive interaction between work and life contributes to employee well-being. Skills, confidence, and positive emotions developed at work may enrich

personal life. Similarly, supportive family relationships can strengthen an employee's ability to manage occupational challenges. Excessive workload disrupts this potentially beneficial relationship when work repeatedly consumes the time and energy needed for recovery and social connection.

The consequences may include family disagreements, emotional withdrawal, missed responsibilities, and reduced relationship satisfaction. Employees may then experience additional stress at home, which further weakens their ability to cope at work. Work–life balance should therefore not be dismissed as a private concern. It is connected to employee stability, attendance, motivation, and long-term retention.

Active Rest as a Practical Intervention

Active rest is one practical strategy for reducing some consequences of demanding or sedentary work. Unlike passive breaks spent continuously sitting, scrolling through social media, or remaining at a workstation, active rest involves brief, manageable physical activity. Examples include walking, stretching, mobility movements, light aerobic exercise, breathing exercises, or simple group activities.

Michishita et al. (2017) examined short group exercise sessions completed by workplace units. The intervention involved approximately 10 minutes of exercise during lunch breaks, three times per week, over a 10-week period. The researchers observed improvements in vigor, interpersonal stress, workplace support, job satisfaction, and physical activity. They concluded that active rest was useful for improving "personal relationships, mental health, and physical activity among workers" (p. 122).

This approach is valuable because it does not require expensive equipment or extensive time away from work. A brief walk, stretching session, or guided movement break can interrupt prolonged sitting and give employees a psychological pause from concentrated tasks. Group activity may also promote informal communication and strengthen relationships among colleagues.

Broader evidence supports the potential value of workplace physical-activity programs. Marin-Farrona et al. (2023) reviewed workplace wellness interventions based on physical activity and found that many programs produced improvements in health-related and work-related outcomes. However, results varied among studies, and not every program improved all health, productivity, or financial measures. This means that workplace exercise should be thoughtfully designed, adequately supported, and evaluated rather than presented as a universal solution.

Most importantly, active rest must not be used to shift responsibility for harmful working conditions entirely onto employees. Ten minutes of stretching cannot correct impossible deadlines, abusive supervision, unpaid overtime, or chronic understaffing. Active rest should complement structural workload reforms rather than replace them.

Summary of Workload Risks and Responses

Workload-related condition	Possible employee consequences	Possible organizational consequences	Appropriate response
Long working hours	Fatigue, sleep disruption, cardiovascular strain	Errors, absenteeism, reduced concentration	Limit excessive overtime and monitor total working hours
High demands with little control	Stress, frustration, emotional exhaustion	Burnout, disengagement, staff turnover	Increase autonomy and involve employees in workload planning
Inadequate staffing	Role overload, skipped breaks, physical exhaustion	Delays, safety incidents, declining service quality	Recruit sufficient staff and redistribute duties fairly
Constant digital availability	Poor psychological detachment and work–family conflict	Reduced morale and long-term productivity	Establish clear after-hours communication boundaries
Prolonged sedentary work	Musculoskeletal discomfort and reduced physical activity	Presenteeism and health-related absence	Introduce active breaks and ergonomic workstations
Low managerial support	Isolation, dissatisfaction, reduced motivation	Conflict, turnover, weak teamwork	Train supervisors and strengthen communication
Lack of recovery time	Chronic stress and burnout	Poor-quality work and rising healthcare costs	Protect breaks, leave, sleep, and nonworking time

Responsibilities of Employers

Employers carry primary responsibility for designing safe and sustainable work. The first step is to measure workload rather than relying solely on managers' assumptions. Organizations can examine

overtime hours, absenteeism, turnover, missed deadlines, employee complaints, error rates, unused leave, and staffing ratios. Confidential employee surveys can provide additional information about perceived demands, control, support, and fairness.

Managers should also distinguish between urgent work and routine poor planning. Occasional emergencies may require additional effort, but repeated emergencies often indicate unrealistic scheduling or inadequate staffing. When every assignment is described as urgent, employees lose the ability to prioritize effectively.

Employees should be involved in decisions concerning how work is organized. Workers who complete a task regularly often understand its practical demands better than senior managers. Consultation can identify unnecessary procedures, duplicated duties, inefficient meetings, and deadlines that do not reflect actual working conditions.

Organizations should protect meal breaks, annual leave, and nonworking hours. Policies limiting after-hours communication can help employees detach psychologically from employment. Flexible schedules may also improve work–life balance, although flexibility should not become an expectation that employees remain available at all times.

Finally, wellness initiatives should be supported by responsible management. Exercise sessions, mental health resources, ergonomic assessments, and resilience training may be valuable, but employees should not be expected to attend them outside paid working time. A credible wellness strategy addresses both individual behavior and organizational sources of harm.

Responsibilities of Employees

Employees also have an important role in managing workload. They should communicate early when assignments, deadlines, or staffing conditions become unrealistic. Remaining silent until exhaustion occurs can make intervention more difficult. Where possible, workers should ask managers to clarify priorities when several tasks compete for limited time.

Employees can also protect their health by taking scheduled breaks, maintaining regular sleep, participating in physical activity, and avoiding unnecessary after-hours work. Active rest can be incorporated into the working day through short walks, stretching, or movement between periods of concentrated work.

Establishing boundaries is equally important. Employees should avoid creating a pattern of constant availability unless their position genuinely requires it and appropriate arrangements are in place. They should use annual leave, seek medical or psychological support when necessary, and document repeated workload concerns through appropriate workplace channels.

However, individual strategies have limits. An employee cannot solve structural understaffing by

becoming more organized, nor can personal resilience make unlimited overtime safe. Healthy behavior is most effective when the organization provides reasonable demands, supportive supervision, fair treatment, and genuine opportunities for recovery.

Conclusion

Employee workload has significant consequences for mental health, physical well-being, family relationships, workplace safety, and organizational performance. Heavy responsibilities may be manageable for a short period when employees have sufficient resources, control, support, and recovery time. When excessive demands become chronic, however, workers face an increased risk of stress, sleep disruption, burnout, physical illness, disengagement, and work–family conflict.

Organizations may initially reduce expenses by employing fewer people or extending working hours, but the apparent savings can be undermined by mistakes, absenteeism, presenteeism, accidents, healthcare costs, and employee turnover. Sustainable productivity is therefore achieved not by extracting the maximum possible effort from workers but by creating conditions in which employees can perform effectively without sacrificing their health.

Active rest provides a practical and evidence-based way to introduce movement, psychological recovery, and social interaction into the working day. Nevertheless, it should form part of a broader strategy that includes adequate staffing, realistic deadlines, employee autonomy, supportive leadership, flexible scheduling, fair rewards, and protected recovery time. Employees should practice healthy behaviors and communicate workload concerns, while employers must remove organizational conditions that make overload unavoidable. A healthy workplace emerges when productivity and employee well-being are treated as mutually reinforcing objectives rather than competing priorities.

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