

Working long and hard? It may do more harm than good

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Nearly half of people in the EU work in their free time to meet work demands, and a third often or always work at high speed, according to [recent estimates](#). If you are one of them, have you ever wondered whether all the effort is really worth it?

Employees who invest more effort in their [work](#) report higher levels of stress and fatigue, along with lower job satisfaction. But they also report receiving less recognition and fewer growth opportunities. And they experience less job security. So increased work effort not only predicts reduced well-being, it even predicts inferior career-related outcomes.

These are some of the results of our [recent study](#) forthcoming in the [Industrial and Labor Relations Review](#). We examined data on almost 52,000 employees representing the European workforce in 2010 and 2015, with the objective of comparing the well-being and career-related implications of their work effort. The data set is not perfect (the ideal data may not exist), but it facilitated a systematic approach to a question far too urgent to postpone.

The finding that excessive work effort predicts unfavourable well-being and career-related outcomes held true after accounting for a wide range of differences across employees, including their gender, age, occupation, education, and level of authority. It even held true in employees with discretion over when and how to perform their work. In other words, excessive work effort broadly predicts unfavourable outcomes.

Why does more effort not pay?

If you were aware that overtime is [more common among higher-income occupations](#), then our results might surprise you. However, just because overtime is more common among high-income occupations, does not automatically mean that there are career benefits to expending more effort than your peers. And because your boss will compare you to your peers, we honed in on exactly this, comparing people within rather than between occupations.

So why does more effort not pay? Overtime reduces day-to-day recovery, while work intensity (the amount of effort you put in during

the time you spend at work) reduces opportunities for recovery during the working day. This lack of recovery accumulates and ultimately decreases your ability to perform at adequate levels and deliver quality work.

Examples abound linking excessive effort with bad outcomes.

Investment bankers and similar professionals, [notorious for working long hours under intense pressure](#), are often believed to suffer disproportionately from [symptoms of stress and depression](#).

Of course, these might be extremes. The point is that sustained excessive effort rapidly reduces employee well-being. By implication, it also reduces the ability to function adequately.

Work intensity is worse

We found that overtime and work intensity do not relate to poor outcomes in equal measure. Increased work intensity is a much stronger predictor both of reduced well-being and of inferior career-related outcomes. Work intensity typically comes from a persistent exposure to tight deadlines, which is often accompanied by constant work at high speed.

To us, this finding stands out. Employers and policymakers are commonly aware of the limits of overtime and long hours. For example, the Boston Consulting Group, a top consultancy firm, experimented with ensuring staff [had planned, uninterrupted time off](#). In the US, the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education [mandated a reduction in resident work hours](#). And France offered its citizens a [legal right to disconnect](#) from work.

In sharp contrast, concerns over work intensity seldom seem to make the news. We believe that they should.

Costs vs benefits

People can benefit from greater awareness of the potential harm from excessive work effort, and particularly [work intensity](#). On average, it is just not clear that the benefits offset the well-being costs of excessive effort. Even in environments where hard work is the norm and people constantly brag about it – [Wall Street](#) comes to mind – our research suggests that pushing yourself to work harder than the norm is not wise.

Our results also show that employers can offer discretion over how and when work should be done. This wouldn't fully resolve the harm done by excessive effort. But it can sometimes attenuate such effects, which might be particularly beneficial in jobs with unpredictable tasks or schedules, [in which overtime is more common](#).

Plus, employers and governments also can benefit from greater awareness, which is important in order to stimulate productive and sustainable effort in the workforce. Beyond the existing initiatives to limit the duration of work, we emphasise that strategies to reduce the harms of intensive work merit greater consideration.

In 2017, Uber [reportedly changed its internal mantra](#) from "work smarter, harder, and longer" to "work smarter" and "harder." Could such a mantra perhaps productively evolve into something as crisp as just "work smarter?"

Provided by City University London

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