

# Over work in America

When the Way We Work  
Becomes Too Much

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ellen Galinsky

James T. Bond

Stacy S. Kim

Lois Backon

Erin Brownfield

Kelly Sakai

There is little question that the way Americans work and live has changed in recent years. The fast-paced, global 24/7 economy, the pressures of competition, and technology have blurred the traditional boundaries between work life and home life. Furthermore, this new economy calls for new skills—skills like responding quickly to competing demands and jumping from task to task. In response, the topic of being overworked has become a hot subject of discussion in workplaces, in the media, in medical journals, and in homes.

In 2001, Families and Work Institute conducted a seminal study to define and measure the impact of being overworked on employees and employers. Among the reasons we began to investigate this phenomenon were the following:

- Studies by Daniel J. Conti from Bank One and Wayne Burton from Northwestern Medical School first published in the 1990s found that depressive disorders within the workplace were much higher than anticipated and were associated with the highest medical plan costs of all behavioral health disorders.<sup>1</sup>
- In 1999, The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) stepped forward to report that because the nature of work is changing at whirlwind speed, perhaps now, more than ever, job stress poses a threat to the health of workers, and in turn, to the health of organizations.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2000, the World Health Organization reported that by 2020, clinical depression was expected to outrank cancer and follow only heart disease to become the second greatest cause of death and disability worldwide.<sup>3</sup>
- In Ellen Galinsky's 1999 nationally representative study called *Ask the Children*, when asked their one wish to improve how their mother's and father's work affected their lives, most children wished their mothers and fathers would be less stressed and less tired.<sup>4</sup>

Our 2001 study on feeling overworked revealed that 1 in 3 U.S. employees experienced feeling overworked as a chronic condition. We were also able to identify some of the factors that lead to being overworked and understand some of its consequences.

Not surprisingly, this study received a great deal of immediate attention from the business community, the public, and the press. But it has been very surprising to us that the study continues to resonate three years later. Thus, we decided that it was time to conduct the study again, and to dig deeper.

Our goal in conducting the 2004 study has been to better identify *how the ways we work today and how we prioritize our lives on and off the job* are related to being overworked. We also felt that it was time to explore in greater depth an issue that provoked a great deal of interest in the 2001 study—the relationship between vacations and being overworked.

There is no question that work demands are continuing to escalate and many Americans have too much work to do (although it must also be said that some Americans would say they have too little work to do). For those with too much to do, the *Overwork in America* study found that the very skills that are fundamental to succeeding in this global economy—specifically, moving quickly from task to task with little time for recovery in between, facing many interruptions, and working outside normal work hours, including vacations—can be useful but also can become detrimental. For a significant group of Americans, the way we work today appears to be negatively affecting their health and effectiveness at work.

We hope this study will be a call to action for employers and policy makers to think about new ways of making work “work” for both employers and employees in this economy. Without this, we believe the human capital and health care costs to employers, employees, and society could be quite high.

Below are some of the highlights of the study that are presented in greater depth in the full report. Data for this report come from telephone interviews with a representative sample of 1,003 wage and salaried employees in the U.S. workforce. For further information about the study methodology, please see page 51 of the full report.

## HOW PERVASIVE IS BEING OVERWORKED IN 2004?

- 26% of employees were overworked *often* or *very often* in the last month;
- 27% were overwhelmed by how much work they had to do *often* or *very often* in the last month; and
- 29% *often* or *very often* didn't have the time to step back and process or reflect on the work they were doing during the last month.

We also found that 44 percent of U.S. employees were overworked *often* or *very often* according to at least one of these measures, while only 29 percent *rarely* or *never* experienced any of these three indices.

In addition, we created an overall index of being overworked by averaging the individual 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, which suggests that the average employee is *sometimes* overworked.

*Employees with average scores above sometimes—1/3 of all U.S. employees—can be viewed as being chronically overworked.*

## What Happens When Employees Are Overworked?

This is the question of ultimate importance in this study. Does the fact that 1 in 3 employees reports being chronically overworked matter? Does it create problems for employers, employees and society at large?

### Work-related Outcomes

To conduct this set of analyses, we divided employees into three groups—those who experience high, mid and low levels of being overworked—and then compared them on a series of work related outcomes.

We found that the more overworked employees are:

- The more likely they are to make mistakes at work. Twenty percent of employees reporting high overwork levels say they make a lot of mistakes at work versus none (0%) of those who experience low overwork levels.
- The more likely they are to feel angry at their employers for expecting them to do so much. Thirty-nine percent of employees experiencing high overwork levels say they feel very angry toward their employers versus only 1% who experience low overwork levels.

- The more likely they are to resent coworkers who don't work as hard as they do. Thirty-four percent of employees who experience high overwork levels versus only 12% of those experiencing low overwork levels say they *often* or *very often* resent their coworkers.

Although this study didn't explore the issue of career advancement, a recent analysis of data from FWI's 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce entitled *Generation & Gender in the Workplace* has revealed a large decrease in the number of employees—especially among college-educated Baby Boom, Generation-X and Generation-Y employees—who want to seek advancement opportunities. Among the major predictors of not wanting to move to positions of greater responsibility is being overwhelmed by everything one has to do.<sup>5</sup>

## Personal Outcomes

To conduct this set of analyses, we divided employees into three groups—those who experience high, mid and low levels of being overworked—and then compared them on a series of personal outcomes.

We found that the more overworked employees feel:

- The more likely they are to have higher levels of stress, using a standardized measure of stress that has been correlated in other research with physical health problems.<sup>6</sup> Only 6% who experience low overwork levels are highly stressed compared with 36% of those who are highly overworked.
- The more symptoms of clinical depression they experience, using a standardized measure that is used to screen people for treatment.<sup>7</sup> Only 8% of those with low overwork levels have high levels of depressive symptoms compared with 21% of those who are highly overworked.
- The more likely they are to report that their health is poorer. Fifty-two percent of employees experiencing high overwork levels report that their health is good versus 65% of those experiencing low overwork levels.
- The more likely they are to neglect caring for themselves. Only 41% of employees who experience high overwork levels say they are very successful in taking good care of themselves versus 68% of those experiencing low overwork levels.

## How Does “The Way We Work” Today Contribute to Being Overworked?

There are a number of factors that one might expect to be linked with being overworked, such as the number of hours or days worked per week and employees' preferences for how much or when they work.

Because many people focus mainly on *time* worked as the major predictor of being overworked, they overlook other aspects of the way we work that our analyses show are, in fact, more significant predictors of being overworked than hours worked. Particularly important is what we call lack of “focus”—or more precisely, the inability to focus on one's work because of constant interruptions and distractions as well as excessive multi-tasking required to keep up with all that has to be done on the job.

### Focus

Fifty-six percent of employees say they *often* or *very often* experience one or both of the following problems during a typical workweek when trying to focus on their jobs:

- I have to work on too many tasks at the same time.

- I am interrupted during the workday, making it difficult to get my work done.

Employees who have more difficulty focusing at work are much more overworked:

- 60% of employees who *very often* have to work on too many tasks at the same time feel highly overworked, compared with only 22% who *sometimes* experience excessive multi-tasking.
- And 64% of those who are interrupted *very often* experience high overwork levels versus only 26% who are *sometimes* interrupted.

Obviously, the ability to multi-task is very important to succeeding in today's economy. Our point is simply that the way we work today may be asking some employees to multi-task too much.

## Job Pressure

One reason that excessive multi-tasking has become standard fare in many jobs is that job pressure is on the rise. Our National Study of the Changing Workforce confirms this increase in job pressure over the past 25 years.<sup>8</sup> In many organizations, there is simply more work to do, often with less time and fewer people to do it.

In this study, we found that 89 percent of employees *agree somewhat* or *strongly* that they experience one or both of the following pressures at work:

- My job requires that I work very hard.
- I never seem to have enough time to get everything done on my job.

Those who experience greater pressure on the job feel much more overworked. Averaging responses to the two items described above, 54 percent of employees who feel highly pressured on the job are highly overworked versus only 4 percent of those who experience low levels of job pressure and 18 percent who experience mid levels of pressure. Clearly job pressure and being overworked go hand in hand.

## Low-value Work

We have heard from numerous employers and employees that not all of the tasks employees do are of equal value or importance, and some of the tasks they are asked to do are simply a "waste of time" (such as having a meeting to plan a meeting to plan a meeting, etc.). Thus, we have begun asking about this issue in our research. We ask employees the extent to which they agree with the following statement:

- I spend a lot of time at work doing things that I think are a waste of time.

Overall 29 percent of employees *strongly* or *somewhat* agree that they spend a lot of time doing things that are a waste of time. Importantly, those who agree are more likely to be highly overworked:

- 51% who feel they have to do a lot of low-value work are highly overworked versus 25% who don't feel this way.

Thus, it is not just how much work employees have to do but also what kind of work that makes a difference. If low-value work were minimized, employees would have more time to keep up with more important tasks and, thereby, feel less overwhelmed and overworked.

## Accessibility

Finally, there is the issue of accessibility in this 24/7 economy. We asked employees in this study:

- How often do coworkers, supervisors, managers, customers, or clients contact you or do you contact them about work-related matters outside normal work hours?

This has become an increasingly salient issue as technology (cell phones, beepers, computers, email, etc.) and flexible work schedules blur the lines between work and so-called non-work times. We find that 1 in 3 employees (33%) is in contact with work once a week or more outside normal work hours. Those who are in contact with work once a week or more outside of normal work hours are more often highly overworked (44%) than those who have little or no contact (26%).

## Working While on Vacation

Employees who do work related to their jobs while on vacation tend to be more overworked on the job. For example, only 31 percent of employees who *rarely* or *never* work during vacation are highly overworked versus 55 percent who *often* or *very often* work on vacation. Although working during vacation may make some contribution to being overworked on the job, it also seems likely that those who are more overworked on the job feel a greater need, or are under greater pressure, to continue to work during their holidays.

## Is Working in a More Effective Workplace Associated with Being Less Overworked?

In previous research, we have identified a number of factors that are characteristic of an effective workplace—that is, a workplace where both the employer and employees fare better. In this study we found that:

- Employees who have jobs that provide them more opportunities to continue to learn, whose supervisors support them in succeeding on the job, who have the flexibility they need to manage their job and their personal and family life, and who have input into management decision-making are less likely to be overworked. This is true even when they work long hours and have very demanding jobs.

## How Are Employees' Work Life Priorities Related to Being Overworked?

We know that employees are affected by the work environment *and* by how they themselves approach and cope with stressful situations. Previous studies we have conducted revealed that employees' priorities make a difference. Thus, we asked whether employees' work life priorities are related to how overworked they are. We found:

- Employees who are family-centric (putting a higher priority on family than on work) or dual-centric (putting an equivalent priority on family and work) are less likely to be overworked than employees who are work-centric.

Although work-centric employees work longer hours than others, and longer work hours are associated with being more overworked, this, by itself, does not explain (statistically) why work-centric employees feel more overworked. Indeed, one might assume that putting work first, spending more time and energy on one's job, and thus probably getting more done, would leave them feeling less overworked, but the opposite is the case.

## Are Some Demographic Groups within the Workforce More Overworked than Others?

To address this question we compared men with women, employees from different generations, employees with varying family responsibilities, managers and professionals with employees in other occupations, employees who work full-time and part-time, and employees with different levels of earnings.

### Gender

Women are somewhat 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, and are more likely to have jobs with certain other characteristics that appear to contribute to being overworked than do women. Women, however, report that their jobs require multi-tasking more than men do. When we compared men and women who experience multi-tasking challenges with the same frequency, the observed gender difference in experiencing overwork disappeared. Thus, too much multi-tasking appears to account for women's greater likelihood of being overworked.

### Age

Members of the Baby Boom generation (ages 40-59 in 2004) feel more overworked than employees in other generations. Boomers work longer hours on average, are more likely to desire fewer work hours, more frequently experience interruptions at work, more often have elder care responsibilities, and have higher average earnings (which indicates a higher level of responsibility on the job) than other groups of employees. All of these factors are associated with being more overworked. When we compare Boomers with other employees in the same situations, however, the apparent difference between Boomers and others in being overworked disappears. Thus, being overworked is a function of the kinds of jobs employees have, not their age or generation.

### Family Responsibilities

Perhaps very surprisingly to many, having children under 18 or having more than one child are not—in themselves—associated with being more overworked. Among those with children, however, the parents of teenagers are more overworked than parents with younger children.

In addition, we found that employees with elder care responsibilities tend to be more overworked than employees without these responsibilities.

### 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, employees identifying themselves as managers and professionals who typically have jobs with greater responsibilities are more overworked than others.

## VACATIONS AND BEING OVERWORKED

In addition to re-examining the phenomenon of being overworked that we identified and studied in 2001, this study explores in greater depth an issue that evoked much interest in the 2001 study—vacations and being overworked.

### How Much Vacation Do Employees Take?

#### Vacation Access and Use

- 79% of U.S. employees have access to paid vacations; and
- The average number of paid vacation days employees have is 16.6 days. The average number of vacation days employees had already taken or expected to take in 2004 was 14.6 days.

The most important finding on how U.S. employees take their vacations is:

- More than 1/3 of employees (36%) do not plan to use their full vacations.

#### Longest Vacation

Very few U.S. employees (14%) take extended time off for their longest vacations—defined as 2 weeks or more including weekend days.

- 37% take less than a 7-day vacation including weekend days, 12% take 1 – 3 days, and 25% take 4 – 6 days;
- 49% take a 7 – 13-day vacation including weekend days; and
- 14% take a vacation of 2 weeks (14 days including weekend days) or more.

### How Do Employees Use Vacation?

#### Activities During Vacation

On average, employees who take paid vacations spend:

- 69% of their time relaxing and enjoying themselves with family or friends or by themselves;
- 19% of their time meeting family responsibilities—such as illness, funerals, care for sick children—or because of their own personal illness; and
- 13% of their time doing other things. Although we didn't ask, this could include reserve military service, working at other jobs, going to school, etc.

Women spend somewhat less time on average (64%) than men (72%) relaxing and enjoying themselves while vacationing and more time meeting family responsibilities (24% versus 15%). Other research, including FWI's 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce, indicates that women still tend to take greater responsibility for family matters than men, which most likely explains this gender difference.

### Working While on Vacation

Overall, we found that most employees don't work during vacations: 58 percent never do work related to their jobs while vacationing, while another 21 percent rarely do any work during vacation. In contrast, just more than 1 in 5 employees (21%) works *sometimes*, *often* or *very often* while on vacation with 9 percent working *often* or *very often*.

It is clear that employees with the greatest job responsibilities and demands are those most likely to work during their vacations: managers and professionals, higher earners, employees who work the longest hours, employees who are work-centric, and those who typically work outside normal work hours. In fact, 20 percent of those who contact others or are contacted by others about work matters during non-work times on a regular basis work on their vacations *often* or *very often*. They have clearly established a pattern that blurs the lines between work and family/personal time.

### How Do Employees Feel When They Return from Vacation?

#### Length of Time to Feel Relaxed on Vacation

On average, employees say that it takes them 3 days to relax when they go on vacation, including travel time. The median number of days is 2. That is, 50 percent of employees are able to relax within 2 days and 50 percent take more than 2 days. However, our statistical analyses show that longer vacations, of 7 days or more, are associated with better psychological outcomes than shorter vacations.

#### Feelings upon Return from Vacation

Vacations obviously have a restorative effect on employees, with most feeling more relaxed (83%) and more energized (74%) when they return from their longest vacations. However, a significant proportion of the U.S. workforce (43%) returns from vacations feeling overwhelmed by everything they have to do. Work piles up during vacation and while most return rejuvenated for their work, some talk about feeling that they are "drowning" in accumulated work.

#### How the Reasons for Vacations Relate to Feelings upon Return

Not unexpectedly, for the 15 percent of employees who take their vacations to address family responsibilities or personal illness, vacations are less restorative than is the case for those who are able to take vacations to relax and enjoy themselves. It seems clear that to the extent that workplace policies do not provide sufficient flexibility, sick leave, or family leave to address family matters and personal illness without having to use vacation days, employees may be forced to use vacation time for these purposes, with apparent negative consequences.

#### Employees Who Feel Overwhelmed after Their Longest Vacation

Employees with greater responsibilities and more demanding jobs are more likely than others to feel overwhelmed when they return from their longest vacation.

Although one might hypothesize that employees who work while vacationing are better able to keep up with work demands, thereby avoiding a pile-up of work that needs to be done upon their return, this does not appear to be true. Among employees who work *often* or *very often* during vacations, 64

percent feel overwhelmed when they return from their longest vacation, and 50 percent of those who work *sometimes* during vacation also feel overwhelmed. Apparently the demands of their jobs exceed their abilities to keep up both when they are on the job *and* working on vacation. In short, vacations—particularly working vacations—are not a panacea for the strains and stresses of very demanding jobs.

Employees' priorities matter too. Employees who place a higher priority on work than their family or personal life (work-centric) are more likely to feel overwhelmed when going back to work after vacation than employees who place equivalent priority on work and family (dual-centric) or greater priority on family than work (family-centric). This relationship holds even when we control for work hours, job pressures, the extent of multi-tasking, frequency of interruptions, and being overworked on the job.

### **Do Vacation Benefits and Characteristics Predict Being Overworked?**

In order to understand just how vacations are related to being overworked, we conducted analyses to determine whether any of the aspects of vacations we have been investigating (their length, etc.) are associated with being overworked once we statistically controlled for factors that are correlated with both vacation benefits and being overworked such as employees' job responsibilities and job demands.

We had hypothesized that taking a longer vacation might be associated with feeling less overworked on the job, but once we adjust for differences in employees' job responsibilities and job demands, we find that it is not.

However, one predictor—taking a higher percentage of vacation days just to relax and enjoy oneself—is associated with feeling less overworked on the job. Whether employees who are more overworked are less inclined to take vacations just to relax and enjoy themselves or whether taking vacations for simple relaxation and enjoyment makes them feel less overworked on the job, we cannot say.

Nonetheless, employees who do take a higher percentage of vacation days just to relax and enjoy themselves *even when they feel overworked on the job* are significantly *less* likely to return to work feeling overwhelmed by all they have to do after taking their longest vacation. Thus, it seems that encouraging employees to take time to simply relax and enjoy themselves enhances the restorative impact of vacation time with benefits to both employees and employers. This may have implications for how employers structure their paid time-off programs.

Another predictor is associated with feeling more overworked even after our control variables are introduced. As previously noted, employees who more frequently do work related to their jobs while vacationing are more likely to feel overworked on the job than those who work less frequently or not at all during their vacations. To what extent being overworked on the job leads to working during vacation or vice versa, we cannot say. Nonetheless, they are closely associated for 14 percent of the workforce and moderately associated for another 40 percent. Employees with very demanding jobs and those who are work-centric are most likely to fall into the category of being more overworked on the job *and* working more on vacation.

Those who are most overworked on the job *and* work most frequently during vacation—14 percent of all employees—are:

- Much more likely to be overwhelmed (72%) when returning to work from their longest vacations than others (39%);

- Less likely to feel energized (58%) after vacation than other employees (77%); and
- Less likely to feel relaxed (71%) than others (83%).

In short, a significant proportion of employees who are the most overworked on the job and work more frequently when vacationing do not return to work more relaxed and energized from vacation and are overwhelmed by all the work that has piled up in their absence. Thus, it appears that, for this particular segment of the workforce, vacations may sometimes have negative consequences.

## Implications for Employers

There have been various employer efforts to deal with the changing times and changing economy, such as the quality movement, re-engineering, and diversity and work life initiatives.

The findings of this and other studies conducted by Families and Work Institute suggest that it is time for serious efforts to create more effective workplaces. Such efforts should:

- **Be based on empirical research that identifies critical aspects of an effective workplace.** For example, this study indicates that employees who have jobs that provide them more opportunities to continue to learn, whose supervisors support them in succeeding on the job, who have the flexibility they need to manage their job and their personal and family life, and who have input into management decision-making are less likely to feel overworked. This is true even when they work long hours and have very demanding jobs.

Employers need to think about redesigning their workplaces to ensure that these and other critical components of an effective workplace<sup>9</sup> are valued, worked toward, and part of the criteria for measuring success.

- **Consider employees for who they are, not just what they produce, with strengths and interests both inside and outside work.** Our research also reveals that employees who are dual- or family-centric versus work-centric are healthiest and most successful at work and at home. Having a life outside of work doesn't detract from work success—rather it appears to enhance it.

Employers need to reframe the way they think about employees and value and encourage, rather than disparage, dual-centric or family-centric employees.

- **Rethink the way employees work today.** An obvious and understandable response to the competitive pressures of the global economy is to keep throwing more and more work at people. However, our data lead us to the conclusion that employers need to rethink the way employees work today. A useful analogy is competitive sports where it is well known that periods of recovery need to be interspersed within periods of "pushing hard."

Obviously, every job and every employee is different. Despite these differences, however, strategies to address issues of being overworked can be developed for all types of jobs. We suggest that work teams create plans to improve the following aspects of work. We also suggest that managers and employees be held accountable for measuring the success of these team-led initiatives, making changes as needed.

- *Focus.* There should be a balance between times when employees can concentrate on the task at hand and when they are multi-tasking and being interrupted. Work teams need to set the parameters. For example, some work teams have set aside times during the day when employees do not interrupt each other.
- *Job pressure.* Again, there should be a balance between the kind of pressure that energizes employees and fosters the development of new competencies and the kind of pressure that depletes them. Setting more realistic deadlines may be part of the solution as some employers have discovered.
- *Low-value work.* Work teams need to discuss and define the work they do that is high-priority and the work they do that is low-value. Then they can find ways to either drop or change the low-value work so that the time and energy they spend at work is more efficient.
- *Accessibility.* Work teams need to discuss how accessible to one another they need to be to each other outside normal work hours and set parameters around when it is important to contact each other and when it isn't.
- *Working while on vacation.* Employers should encourage their employees to take their vacations and to take them in longer stretches if possible. Employers and employees need to be made aware of the possible disadvantages of working on vacation and the importance of having vacations serve their central purpose of providing time for employees to rest and "recharge their batteries." Since so many employees return from vacation feeling overwhelmed by everything they have to do, perhaps work teams can set up procedures for helping each other take "real" time off by better delegating tasks while employees are away.

We hope that the results of this study will spur the creation of more effective workplaces that make work "work" for both employers and employees in this new economy.

This survey has a margin of error of +/- 2.2 percent.

- 1 Conti, D.J. & Burton, W. (1994). The economic impact of depression in a workplace. *Journal of Occupational Medicine*, 36, 983-988.
- 2 NIOSH. (1999). *Stress at work* (DHHS (NIOSH) Publication No. 99-101). Cincinnati, OH: Author. (Also available online: <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/pdfs/stress.pdf>).
- 3 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).
- 4 Galinsky, E. (1999). *Ask the children: What America's children really think about working parents*. New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc.
- 5 *Generation & gender in the workplace*. (2004). New York, NY: Families and Work Institute.
- 6 Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 24, 385-396.
- 7 Whooley, M.A., Avins, A.L., Miranda, J. & Browner, W.S. (1997). Case finding instruments for depression: Two questions are as good as many. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 12, 439-445.
- 8 Bond, J.T., Thompson, C., Galinsky, E. & Prottas, D. (2003). *Highlights of the {2002} National Study of the Changing Workforce*. New York, NY: Families and Work Institute.
- 9 Bond, J.T., Galinsky, E. & Hill, J. (2004). *When Work Works: Flexibility, a critical ingredient in creating an effective workplace*. New York, NY: Families and Work Institute. Find this and related reports at [www.whenworkworks.org](http://www.whenworkworks.org).