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• Reprint #61404 • https://mitsmr.com/3eW4J1q

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The way that companies expect employees to work isn't working. Despite growing awareness of widespread and chronic overload and its ill effects, companies often expect professionals and managers to be "on" well beyond traditional work hours — attending meetings at night, responding to requests on weekends and during vacations, and monitoring their phones, texts, and emails whenever they are awake. [1] Many people become exhausted and burned out struggling to meet such expectations. The result is an overwhelming, demoralizing sense that the demands of work are unrealistic and cannot be met with the resources at hand.

Of course, overload is not restricted to salaried, white-collar workers. [2] But we have found that they are acutely susceptible. In our survey of more than 1,000 of these workers in the IT division of TOMO, our pseudonym for a Fortune 500 company generally viewed as a good employer and a decent corporate citizen, 41% of the division's professionals and 61% of its managers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that there is "not enough time to get your job done." [3]

Escalating work demands and the exhaustion they produce surfaced repeatedly in the 400 interviews we conducted with TOMO employees from 2010 to 2014. For example, Vanessa, a director at the company, told us that she expects her direct reports to "be accessible 24-7, 365 days a year." If they aren't going to be available outside working hours, she said, "they need to let me know."

Jonathon, a manager who reports to Vanessa, shared multiple stories of work encroaching on his home life and volunteer activities. He said he often takes late-night work calls, some of which wake his wife. Despite the success he has attained at work, Jonathon said he is steering his children away from professions like his that are prone to overload. He believes it is an unhealthy and unsustainable way to earn a living.

The Research

- The authors led a five-year, randomized field experiment involving 56 teams in the IT division of a Fortune 500

company. This study also involved collaborators in the Work, Family &
Health Network.

- Over that period, they surveyed 1,000 professionals and managers multiple times and conducted 400 in-depth interviews.

- The survey and interview responses, ethnographic observations, and company data — along with findings from studies looking at other professions and work settings — shaped the insights in this article.

Evidence collected at TOMO and in a variety of other workplaces, including consulting companies and medical facilities, suggests that Jonathon is right. We heard story after story of health concerns tied to overload from the IT professionals and managers at TOMO. They told us about heart attacks and strokes, disrupted sleep and related forgetfulness, unexplained hives, and other ills. They also described an inability to muster the energy to exercise and to prepare healthy meals, and work pressures that prompted them to smoke and drink more than they considered wise. In fact, employees in our study who put in long hours reported significantly higher levels of burnout, stress, and psychological distress (feeling sad, nervous, restless, hopeless, worthless, and that everything is an effort) than employees who worked fewer hours.

Unpredictable schedules and always-on availability also contribute to employee overload and deteriorate their well-being. Specifically, employees who have variable schedules that they do not control report significantly higher levels of burnout, stress, and psychological distress, as well as lower levels of job satisfaction, than employees who have fixed schedules or feel more in control of when they work. [4] Studies of all kinds of occupations are now documenting the negative health impacts of very long hours and limited control over work time. [5]

Companies that push employees as hard as TOMO are hurting themselves, too. Talented people quit when they become overwhelmed by work or resentful of unrealistic demands — voting with their feet after being expected to do too much for too long. [6] When they exit, their employers lose expertise, knowledge, and sometimes valuable customer relationships.

When overloaded knowledge workers and managers stay, they are less likely to come up with particularly efficient, creative, or innovative solutions to business and technical challenges. The quality of work suffers when employees are trying to do more than is feasible, at a fast pace and with lean teams. [7] At TOMO, the developers we interviewed were mournful about the mediocre code they produced in the face of unrealistic deadlines, and they expressed dread about the problems that were likely to arise because of skipped steps and deferred maintenance. As one of them put it, "We are under siege and doing the best we can, as best as we can, in making shortcuts."

To better understand the causes and effects of overload, and test solutions to it, we partnered with TOMO over a five-year period. As part of the Work, Family &
Health Network, we collected data from a variety of sources, including the company, employees, and their families. We then conducted a randomized field experiment involving the entire IT division (a total of 56 teams) to test the efficacy of a work redesign initiative named STAR — an acronym for Support, Transform, Achieve Results. [8]

We basically flipped a coin to determine which units would participate in the STAR initiative and which would serve as the control group by continuing to follow the company's existing policies. Then we measured the business and employee outcomes in each group and compared them. This article reports what we discovered: Overload is a pernicious problem that is usually caused by organizational demands, but employers can address it by making reasonable and feasible changes to how work is done.

It's Not a 'Balance' Problem

When people are feeling overwhelmed at work, their organizations often define and treat the problem as a lack of work-family balance. But this framing is risky for a variety of reasons.

Given deep cultural associations between family and femininity, both managers and employees are primed to associate the subject of family with women. This makes it more likely that what's really an overload problem will be treated as a women's issue or an issue primarily affecting working mothers, along with some involved fathers and employees caring for elderly relatives.

This framing also reinforces the perception that mothers are less committed and less competent employees, while fathers are viewed as dedicated workers, in part because men's workloads at home tend to be lighter. (It's assumed that they can do whatever is asked of them by their managers and colleagues.) This bias runs deep and underlies well-known motherhood penalties in hiring. [9] But overload affects both men and women, at all ages and life stages. At TOMO, for instance, younger workers, singles, and people with few or no family responsibilities also felt overwhelmed and overloaded at work.

When overload is framed in terms of a work-family or even a work-life imbalance, scholars, advocates, and supportive managers often turn to flexible work arrangements, like a flextime schedule or regular telecommuting, as a solution. But companies usually set up these arrangements as "accommodations." [10] Individuals can ask for a flexible work arrangement, but managers generally have the discretion to approve or deny the request. This creates an undesirable "Mother, May I?" negotiating dynamic, which positions the worker's personal needs as an outlier.

In practice, many employees, even those who could clearly work at different times and locations, have limited access to these options simply because they report to managers who want "butts in seats." Meanwhile, those who are granted flexibility run the risk of *flexibility stigma*. A growing base of research shows that people who pursue flexibility may be viewed as uncommitted to their work and unsuitable for advancement. When that happens, they can end up trading promotion opportunities or wage increases for flexibility. [11]

Ironically, the career risks tied to flexibility policies can reinforce gender inequality. (It is ironic because U.S. companies adopted such policies partly in response to the movement of women, particularly middle-class mothers, into professional and managerial jobs in the 1980s and 1990s.) A study of high-status management consultants found that women were more likely than men to seek formal flexible work options, to feel marginalized or penalized for doing so, and to leave their companies in frustration. In that study, about a third of the men limited their work hours and travel — compared with their peers, who worked very long hours — without using the company's official flex policy. These men who chose to "pass" as ideal workers had performance ratings that were "significantly better than those who revealed their deviance" by seeking out informal or formal flexible work arrangements. [12] Such arrangements were understood to be mostly for mothers, even though that was not stated in the policy.

Finally, flexible work arrangements allow for shifting hours or work location but often don't change the expectation that employees will work, answer a call, or get on a plane whenever the need arises. The root problem is the unreasonable amount of work and the expectation of constant availability; flexibility policies that don't address these issues can easily become a *cause* of overload, rather than the solution to it.

Creating a New Normal for Work

How can companies address overload and its consequences while avoiding the flaws inherent in flexibility as an accommodation? Drawing on existing research, our team identified three key conditions organizations should foster. [13]

First, when employees have greater control over when, where, and how they do their work, they are less stressed, report better health, and are more engaged in their work and committed to their jobs. Second, when managers show that they care about and support their employees' personal lives and priorities, as well as their professional development, workers feel much better at work and can concentrate on giving their best. Third, when work is demanding, it is essential for managers to give employees clear direction on their performance, goals, and priorities. Otherwise, there is

a risk that employees will be judged on how many hours they are working, how visible they are to their bosses, and how quickly they respond in a chaotic environment — not on what they are contributing.

The STAR dual-agenda work redesign initiative was developed to satisfy these three conditions. *Dual agenda* refers to both working effectively and working in ways that are sustainable and sane and that reflect employees' personal and family priorities while protecting their health. *Work redesign* refers to constructing a "new normal" by reconsidering and revamping what is expected of — and what is done by — employees. In contrast to flex policies in which the status quo is not questioned, dual-agenda work redesign initiatives involve an entire team or department and provide the time, space, and cultural support needed to collectively change how work should and will be done.

Accordingly, STAR pairs bottom-up changes conceived and implemented by employees with structured training: Over the course of several participatory sessions, work units identify practices and processes that would increase employees' control over their own time and help reduce "low value" tasks. Meanwhile, managers receive instruction on how to demonstrate support for both employees' personal lives and effective performance on the job. At TOMO, the participatory sessions totaled eight hours and were conducted over three months so groups could socialize and practice new ideas between sessions. The managerial instruction lasted four hours, spread over two sessions. Managers also were given an app that encouraged them to see supportive interactions as a core part of their role and created new habits by nudging them to act in more explicitly supportive ways.

In the redesign process, teams determine how more flexible schedules and opportunities to work at home — as a norm, not as a special accommodation — could be applied to different jobs. Some colocated team members in TOMO's STAR units chose a day or two each week to work together in the office or determined together which types of decisions or meetings worked best when conducted in person. No one was pressured to work at home or shift his or her schedule; those decisions were up to employees and informed by team discussions.

TOMO's STAR units also decided how to communicate and coordinate effectively with fewer meetings, thus creating more time for focused work during the day. Some teams replaced standing work-status meetings with a tracking dashboard. Others sought to run leaner, more efficient meetings by asking in advance for input on agenda items and inviting only participants with a direct stake in the issues and decisions under consideration. And some teams created protocols for contacting one another in urgent situations, so team members could ignore chat and email for several hours each day. [14]

Many of the people in these groups began to work at home more often and shifted their hours to better accommodate their personal lives. More important, they changed their assumptions about who legitimately decides when, where, and how work is done. For example, managers no longer expected employees to ask permission to work at home on any given day, and people weren't necessarily required to tell anyone where they'd be working. Employees in STAR groups worried less about working long hours and immediately responding to calls and emails and focused more on getting the work done. For their part, managers supported that focus by identifying and articulating their expectations of individuals and groups, and evaluating performance based upon those expectations. Managers knew that this clarity was useful before STAR, but they were often caught up in the frenetic pace of work themselves and had skipped those discussions.

In short, STAR was much more than a policy change approved by top executives and then rolled out to subordinates. It gave professionals and managers the opportunity to redesign everyday work practices to reflect the realities of their lives, today's technologies, and the demands of the work. STAR ensured that changes in *when* and *where* work happened were accompanied by deliberate efforts to consider *how* teams worked.

The Payoffs for Companies and Employees

TOMO's leaders had invited our research team into the organization because of concerns that employees were

burned out, exhausted, and looking to leave the company at their first opportunity. The company's IT executives and HR professionals recognized the overload that had arisen from repeated downsizing, the need to coordinate with offshore counterparts, and always-on technologies. They hoped that dual-agenda work redesign would reduce burnout, increase job satisfaction, and help the company retain valued employees. As it turned out, STAR succeeded on all these measures.

We evaluated the effects in two ways. The field experiment data allowed us to compare the changes that occurred among STAR participants with the experiences of the control group in the same period. Because work units were randomly selected to participate, the employees and managers in the STAR and control groups were extremely similar before the initiative, giving us a high degree of confidence that these are real effects due to STAR. The interview and ethnographic data revealed how work redesign innovation was experienced, providing us with stories and reflections about how changes felt to employees and how teams figured out what would work in specific situations.

One year into the initiative, and without any changes in their job duties, employees and managers in STAR teams reported significantly lower levels of burnout and higher levels of job satisfaction than their counterparts in the control group. These improvements were especially large among nonsupervisory employees. Take Sherwin, a software designer and developer in his 50s who had a heart attack the year before the initiative began. "I'm constantly busy. I stay busy," he said. "But I don't feel overwhelmed. So that's huge." Sherwin described STAR as producing "100% less stress," and the broader results of our surveys at TOMO confirmed that other participants' levels of stress and psychological distress (a preclinical measure of poor mental health) were significantly lower than the levels in the control group.

A Manager's Guide to Fighting Overload

Even if they lack support from senior leadership, managers can encourage new ways of working and challenge the status quo of overload and work intensification in the following ways:

Focus less on when, where, and how work happens and more on results. Don't celebrate long hours or treat them as a sign of commitment. Recognize that managing is about getting work done, not monitoring who's in the office or rewarding those who respond immediately to any email, text, or call.

Acknowledge and support people's lives and priorities outside of work. Ask employees what is happening outside of work and encourage their efforts to do what matters to them. Be sure that parents and caregivers feel supported, and check that employees who do not have obvious family responsibilities (but do have friends and personal priorities) feel heard and respected too.

Identify and reduce low-value work. In every bureaucracy, meetings without agendas, duplicative tasks, and unnecessary record keeping take time away from real work. Managers and their teams can ferret out those draining activities so that they can better focus on what really needs to be done.

Clarify what is expected of each employee. Do this as a real planning exercise, with employee input, and not simply as a box to fill in on a formal performance review. Remind employees to question tasks and activities that do not seem to be important steps toward their primary goals.

Encourage employees to share when they are feeling overloaded. Ask for alerts when people cannot complete a task within normal hours. Managers may not always be able to hire additional staff members or move deadlines, but they can help prioritize tasks, take over some tasks, and look for others who can pitch in. They can also ensure that people feel it is safe to point out unrealistic expectations and admit to overload, and trust that they will be not penalized for it.

Make it the default that employees decide when and where they work. Build a new team culture that assumes flexibility and then problem-solves to make it work for everyone. If a particular choice does not seem feasible, discuss it with the employee or the team.

Recognize that people need concentrated time (often offline) to work effectively. Support employees who want to unplug for a few hours to work on particular tasks or even to recharge. Discuss, as a team, what counts as an urgent need to interrupt that blocked time and how to reach one another in that situation.

Change up your own work routines to fit in your personal, family, or health commitments. Do that publicly and without guilt, as a role model
for working in more sustainable ways.

The STAR participants also felt they had more control over when and where they worked, and they reported that their immediate supervisors were more supportive of their personal and family lives, compared with their own previous experiences and with the control group baseline. Interestingly, there was a particularly big jump in the degree to which fathers in the STAR group rated managerial support, suggesting that the dual-agenda work redesign reached men whose family responsibilities were either hidden or assumed to be minimal before. Overall, STAR participants reported fewer work-life conflicts and were more likely to say they had enough time for family after the

initiative was launched.

Our post-STAR interviews revealed that people were taking better care of themselves by fitting in more exercise, sleeping later on work-at-home days, and finding time to connect with neighbors and friends. Using actigraphy watches that measured sleep objectively, we found that participants in STAR slept slightly longer and were more likely to feel rested upon waking than they had previously. People averaged about 8 to 13 minutes per day of additional sleep, depending on which wave of follow-up data we consider. These are small gains in duration, on average, but it is notable that sleep improved even though the STAR training did not explicitly address healthy sleep. What's more, these changes lasted throughout the evaluation period.

Finally, using TOMO's HR records, we found that participants were significantly less likely to voluntarily leave the company than their control group counterparts. Over the ensuing three years, voluntary exits were 40% lower for managers and employees in STAR — a difference in turnover that drove a positive return on investment of about 1.6.

In sum, we found exciting evidence that a team-based approach to redesigning work in relatively small and feasible ways brought benefits to TOMO, as well as to overloaded individuals. However, an unexpected complication arose when a merger was announced during our study. The positive changes in job satisfaction and the reductions in burnout, stress, and psychological distress were much larger and clearer among the employees who entered STAR before the merger was announced. After the announcement, the benefits were dampened — largely because employees worried that the new approach to work would not survive the merger. And indeed, instead of expanding the use of dual-agenda work redesign, the new leadership team in charge at TOMO abandoned it.

The unfortunate decision to revert to old policies notwithstanding, TOMO's experience with STAR demonstrates that companies can approach professional and managerial work in more effective, sustainable ways. We believe that dual-agenda work redesign will become more and more attractive as executives, managers, and employees increasingly recognize the costs of overload. People burn out and leave — or they stay but struggle to create value because they're spent.

Clearly, it's time to make the way we work work better for employers and employees alike.

About The Authors

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