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RUNNING ON EMPTY: OVERWORKED PEOPLE IN DEMANDING WORK ENVIRONMENTS

G 98–4 (332)

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February, 1998

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In contemporary organizations, overwork is often viewed as a key problem inherent in today's demanding working environment. People at all organizational and socio-economic levels note the growing expectation to routinely work evenings and weekends and the resulting conflict between personal and work life. A variety of factors have contributed to this growing tendency toward overwork and loss of personal life balance. The increasing globalization requires employees to interact with colleagues around the world and, consequently, around the clock to connect across time zones. The plethora of corporate downsizings has resulted in fewer employees to accomplish the same amount of work. The increasing demand for employees to work more hours is exacerbated by the growing number of dual-career families and working mothers who have less time to manage household responsibilities.

The result is that people are feeling more overworked than ever before, even to the point of burnout. In one study reported by *The Wall Street Journal*, half of the employees surveyed reported having much more to do on the job than three years ago (Shellenbarger, February 27, 1997). Another study revealed that as much as one-fourth of the labor force is at risk of burnout (Shellenbarger, June 25, 1997). Recently, in a highly publicized case, a senior executive at Pepsi resigned because she was burned out by the intense time and travel demands required by her job and felt guilty that she could not spend more time with her young family (Shellenbarger, October 8, 1997). As conflicts between employees' personal and professional lives intensify and as the workforce becomes ever more fatigued, the public discourse surrounding overwork continues to grow.

The topic of overwork is of significant interest to practitioners and scholars alike. Practitioners realize that though the demand for more work from employees is not likely to diminish in the near future, the trend toward more working hours comes at a considerable cost.

Long work hours lead to stress and strain (Galambos & Walters, 1992) which, in turn, can lead to higher accident levels, greater absenteeism, and reduced productivity (Ganster & Schaubroeck, 1991). Stress-related workers' compensation claims increased threefold during the early 1980s alone (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Organizations are also finding that some of their best people, fearing burnout, are choosing to give up their corporate career for jobs with more flexibility and fewer demands on their time (Fassel, 1990). With the growing recognition of the costs of overwork, research on this topic is of utmost importance to organizations.

Similarly, the topic of overwork is also of interest to academics. Prior research has been less than clear on the appropriate conceptualization of the construct of overwork. A variety of interpretations have been applied to this construct, creating confusion around its meaning. Moreover, much of the research on overwork has been conducted on lower-level employees in manufacturing settings. As a result, the focus has been on dependent variables such as productivity, accident rates, job satisfaction, and turnover. We have less understanding of the nature of overwork for more professional employees and those working in service settings. Interesting dependent variables in these settings would include customer satisfaction, responsiveness to change, and organizational commitment. Thus, the notion of overwork has the potential to expand the understanding of both research and practice.

While the notions of work-family conflict, burnout, and loss of personal life balance are related to overwork, they have separate research streams of their own and are thus beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead we limit our focus to the specific issue of overwork, examining this phenomenon from both practical and theoretical perspectives. First we review the current academic and popular literature on the issue of overwork. We then identify fruitful areas for research on the nature of overwork and levers that might reduce the negative consequences of

overwork from a series of informal interviews with employees about the issue of overwork. We offer ideas on a series of studies that, if executed, might advance our understanding of overwork.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualization of Overwork

The term "overwork" is more commonly used in the popular press than in the academic literature, although a few researchers refer to "overwork" specifically (Schor, 1992; Yogev, 1982, Glass & Estes, 1997). Instead, the term "overload" is preferred by organizational scholars to describe the concept of excessive demands. Specifically, overload, or overwork, occurs when people do not have the resources (for example, time, support staff) necessary to complete all that is required of them (Kahn & Quinn, 1970; Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Much confusion has surrounded overload since its conceptualization by Kahn. First, researchers have confused the concepts of role overload and inter-role conflict so much over the last several decades that entire articles, and even dissertations, have been devoted to clarifying these constructs (Coverman, 1989; Forti, 1994). While there is still disagreement over whether overload is a component of inter-role conflict or a distinct concept, the general consensus is that overload results from having too many demands whereas inter-role conflict results from having demands in one role (for example, work) which are incompatible with the demands in another role (for example, family).

Researchers have also disagreed over whether overwork is an objective or subjective concept. Some researchers see overwork as an objective evaluation of the number of hours worked (Schor, 1992; Glass & Estes, 1997). Others claim that overwork involves the perception of one's workload (Schwartzberg & Dytell, 1988; Kennedy, 1996). In other words, to the extent

that an individual feels overworked, he or she is overworked, regardless of the actual number of hours he or she works. These researchers reason that it is difficult to determine whether a person is overworked based solely on hours worked because people have different coping strategies which may enable them to deal with the negative consequences of working long hours better than others. Still other researchers allow for both objective and subjective components in their conceptualization of overwork (Yogev, 1982; Sutton and Kahn, 1987).

As confusing as these conflicting interpretations are, at least these researchers acknowledged the possibility of other conceptualizations by stating the specific definition they chose to use. Most research on overwork either ignores this important distinction or it defines overwork subjectively, only to operationalize it objectively (or vice versa). While we allow for both the objective and subjective interpretations of overwork, in our agenda for future research described in the final section of our paper, we will focus primarily on subjective overwork, unless otherwise specified. We have chosen a subjective definition of overwork because we are concerned with the negative outcomes of overwork, and it is the perception of being overworked that leads to the negative outcomes, not necessarily the objective number of hours worked (Edwards 1992; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964).

Subjective overwork has been found to be related to many negative consequences, both mental and physical in nature. Employed parents who felt overloaded were more likely to suffer from mental strain such as distress and lack of calmness (Williams & Alliger, 1994). Another study showed that public school teachers experiencing more overload were more likely to be dissatisfied with their job (Cooke & Rousseau, 1984). This same study found overload to be related to physical strain, measured by such symptoms as tiredness, heart pounding, and sweating hands. Other negative outcomes of overwork include depression, nervousness, anxiety, and

insomnia (Karasek, 1979). As mentioned earlier, these negative individual outcomes may lead to negative organizational outcomes such as higher accident levels, greater absenteeism, and reduced productivity (Ganster & Schaubroeck, 1991; Hofmann and Stetzer, 1996). Before turning to our agenda for future research, we briefly discuss why we have seen such an increase in overwork in the past decade.

The Increase in Overwork

There are several reasons why work hours are increasing. Organizations are requiring employees to work longer hours so that they can remain competitive in the global business environment (Perlow, 1997; Loo, 1996). Labor costs are significantly lower in other parts of the world, so organizations must get the most out of their employees in order to be cost effective. There is a clear financial incentive for a company to squeeze as much time as it can out of salaried employees because it is not charged for the incremental hours these employees work. Even with hourly workers, companies prefer to pay overtime rather than hire additional workers because the fewer employees a company hires, the lower the company's expenses are for such things as benefits, recruiting, and training. Overtime is at its highest ever, an average of 4.7 hours a week (Hancock, 1995). The trend toward longer working hours is expected to continue according to a *Fortune* study which reported that 75% percent of the CEO's interviewed said that they will have to work their managers harder because of the increase in global competition (Solo, 1990).

Another factor that has increased the number of hours that employees are expected to work is the organizational trend toward downsizing. Almost half of the companies in America have implemented some form of downsizing over the last decade (Hancock, 1995). Companies

reduce their workforces and expect the 'survivors' to carry the extra load (Mishra & Spreitzer, forthcoming). Survivors are often told by management that they should feel grateful for not being laid off, compelling them to work even harder (Noer, 1993). Furthermore, survivors suffer from job insecurity which puts pressure on them to increase their workload so that they will not be laid off should another phase of downsizing occur (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997; Scott, 1995). According to *Newsweek*, companies are currently asking one employee to do the job of 1.3 employees with no increase in pay and with less time off. Average annual vacation and other paid leave decreased by nearly four days over the last decade (Hancock, 1995).

Major demographic changes in the American labor force have also contributed to the rise in overwork. In 1960, only 28.8% of married women between the ages of 25 and 34 participated in the work force; in 1995, this percentage had risen to 72%. Moreover, in 1975, 36.7% of women with at least one child under six worked outside the home whereas in 1995 this group had increased to 63.5% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1996). As a result of the increase in dual-career families and working mothers, employees now have greater family demands on their time than when there was a spouse at home who took care of the household needs. Many workers, both male and female, feel overworked by the time required to fulfill both family and job responsibilities.

In her book, *The Time Bind*, Arlie Hochschild (1997) suggests that employees themselves may be responsible for their increase in working hours. Many are not taking advantage of flextime and work-family programs. While some may be afraid that their participation in these programs will hurt their career progression, others actually seek to work longer hours. In the dual-career household, work may be a retreat from family problems. At work, individuals may feel more in control and appreciated while at home their life may be more chaotic and less

rewarding. Furthermore, she found that some employees are "overtime hounds" who sign up for more hours so they can purchase the nonessential extras that they desire for themselves and their families.

Finally, technology has brought about a growing sense of overwork. Even when employees are at home or on vacation, technologies such as beepers, e-mail, voice mail, lap tops, and cellular phones make them "always on call." In 1995, five million people owned cellular phones (Hancock, 1995) and by the year 2000, 60 million Americans will own pagers ("Fax me a bedtime story," 1996). Employees who are expected to use the available devices to access their work projects often feel tethered to their jobs twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Research has shown that employees who have computers to help them complete overtime work at home feel more overworked than employees who complete their overtime work at home without the use of a computer (Duxbury, Higgins, & Thomas, 1996). While technology has alleviated certain kinds of job pressures, it has created others, and with this new set of pressures comes the perception that one is never away from work.

In summary, our review of the literature makes evident the confusion on the conceptualization and operationalization of the construct of overwork. It also suggests that several trends ensure that overwork will continue to be a pressing problem for contemporary organizations.

AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While the topic of overwork is clearly a key issue for organizations as they approach the new millennium, our review of the literature indicates that more research is needed to truly understand the construct of overwork. In the section below, we outline an agenda for future

research which addresses the nature of overwork as well as potential levers for reducing overwork.

What is the Nature of Overwork?

As described above, we define overwork as a subjective phenomenon that is distinct from the objective number of hours worked. However, there is a limited understanding of how the number of hours worked influences the perception of overwork. By virtually all indicators, people *feel* more overworked today than perhaps ever before due to the effects of downsizing, technology, and globalization. Yet, while people are clearly feeling more overworked, there are differences of opinion about whether individuals are actually working longer hours today than in previous decades. In research using the annual Current Population Survey, Juliet Schor (1992) finds that employees are currently working an average of 163 more hours a year than in the 1960s. In contrast, John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey (1997), in research using a time diary methodology, claim that Americans are working approximately 140 hours less a year than in the 1960s. So why is it that people feel overworked, even when the amount of time they spend at their jobs may or may not be increasing? Clearly, other factors, as described below, may also contribute to the feeling of being overworked. We identify some of the potential factors in the paragraphs below.

Research Question #1: What factors contribute to feelings of overwork beyond the actual number of hours worked? Robinson and Godbey (1997) suggest that workers feel overworked because their lives are less compartmentalized today. Now work and family domains are more integrated, partly due to the invasion of technology into our homes. The result

is that people do not feel as though they ever can really escape from work even when they may not be working more hours. Moreover, leisure time has become more fragmented with most of it being available in short segments on weekdays instead of long periods on the weekends. Without longer stretches of leisure time, people may not feel as if they have had enough time to relax and replenish themselves.

Future research must seek to understand what contributes to the experience of overwork, beyond the number of hours worked. As a first step, researchers need to collect data on the actual number of hours worked as well as the subjective experience of overwork. This research must cut across a large number of organizations and across various levels within organizations so that a generalized model of overwork can be developed. In most cases, we would expect that more work hours would correlate with perceptions of overwork. However, researchers may learn the most from cases in which individuals work long hours but do not indicate that they feel overworked (or the converse). In these cases, researchers need to find out why long hours do not contribute to feelings of overwork (or the converse). They might look first at demographic factors. For example, employed women with young children may feel overworked no matter how many hours they work due to the intense time demands of these domains. Researchers might also conduct interviews with the individuals who feel overworked even though they are not working long hours to see what other factors influence the perception of overwork besides the number of hours worked. It may be that different organization structures and processes may influence the experience of overwork. For example, some organizations may offer concierge services that help employees get personal business done while working. Others may offer flextime so that workers choose when they will work the required number of hours. These interviews can help researchers identify the range of variables that influence the perception of

overwork. Until systematic research is conducted, we will have a limited understanding of what influences the experience of overwork.

Levers for Reducing the Effects of Overwork

A second area for future research focuses on how to reduce the dysfunctional effects of overwork on employees. One obvious solution is to reduce the number of hours individuals work. Unfortunately, this solution *by itself* is improbable given the need to keep labor costs low in today's highly competitive global environment. Moreover, as indicated in our first research question, other factors influence the experience of overwork besides long hours. So cutting back on hours may have a limited effect on the actual experience of overwork. Consequently, researchers must work to find more effective levers for reducing the effects of overwork.

In our informal interviews with people from different organizations and across different levels, we identified one potential lever for reducing the dysfunctions of overwork -- employee empowerment. Because we have defined overwork in subjective terms, we draw on a subjective or psychological definition of empowerment. Psychological empowerment is defined as intrinsic task motivation manifested within the individual through four cognitive assessments regarding work: self-determination, meaning, impact, and competence (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). To be empowered, in this sense, means to be energized and motivated (Spreitzer, 1995). We suggest that if employees experience one or more of the empowerment dimensions, they will feel more energized and perceptions of overwork may be lessened. We briefly examine how each of the dimensions of empowerment may alleviate feelings of overwork.

Self-determination. Self-determination reflects having a choice in initiating and regulating one's own actions (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989). Drawing on prior research

(Karasek, 1979; Rodin & Langer, 1977), Sutton and Kahn (1987) suggest that having more control may reduce the stress/strain inherent in overwork. For example, employees working 60 hours a week who have a high level of control may experience less strain than employees working the same number of hours who have less control because the former may see it as their choice to work those hours. One study conducted at Baxter International, Inc. found that employees believed that allowing control over decisions helped them deal with heavy work demands (Hammonds, 1997). Our informal interviews suggested the same. One credit manager attested to the positive effects of having some flexibility and choice in his job. "Choice is powerful in relieving stress. If I'm allowed to juggle my time, I don't feel as overworked." Another financial services manager claimed that the flexibility she gained from telecommuting far outweighed the increase in job demands she received after a promotion. "I'm definitely less overworked now that I'm a sales manager and I telecommute. I have more control over my schedule even though I'm working harder and at a higher level." Giving employees more control over when (such as through flextime) and how (such as through telecommuting) they work is likely to enhance feelings of empowerment.

Some popular organizational interventions aimed at reducing the problem of overwork operate by increasing workers' choices about when and how they will work. Telecommuting allows employees the choice to work from home, where they can minimize time commuting to work and where they can take care of personal business more easily. Job sharing and part-time work allow employees the opportunity to work fewer hours but still remain connected to the organization. Charles Schwab & Co. chose to offer job-sharing and part-time work options instead of laying off workers which helped overworked employees who were willing to take a cut in pay for more free time (Scott, 1992). Finally, job-sharing may be a legitimate way for

overworked employees to reduce their load without giving up challenging and stimulating work that they enjoy and are trained to do.

Meaning. Meaning refers to the intrinsic value of work (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). The personal meaning an individual derives from work may alleviate the work-family conflict caused by working long hours (Thompson & Bunderson, 1997). When employees believe that their work is truly important, they may feel more energized (Quinn, O'Neill, & Debebe, 1996) and less overworked, even when working long hours. Several of our interviewees agreed. As one bank president said, "It doesn't matter how many hours a day you work; if you're not working close to your conscience, you will feel overworked." Many entrepreneurs are willing to work incredibly long hours without feeling unduly overworked because of the excitement of starting their own business.

Impact. Impact reflects "making a difference" in terms of accomplishing the purpose of the task (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990, p.672). Empowered employees who feel that they have an impact on the system may feel less overworked because they know the hours they are working are making a difference. In contrast, in some companies, "face time," or being at work even when an employee is not really making a difference, was more important than the actual impact of an employee's work. Our interviews indicated that in these organizations, employees felt quite overworked by the "face time" requirement. One automotive manager described this typical situation: "There are some areas of the company that are just notorious for working long hours with questionable value attached except for the fact that it's face time and it's expected." The employees who complied with the "face time" requirement felt more overworked knowing that their time was having no productive impact. Consequently, companies such as Merck, Cigna, and Marriott International have begun to explore how they can reduce requirements for

"face time." Training managers to reward performance rather than time spent at work is crucial to promoting a balanced lifestyle (Scott, 1996). A senior executive at the Richardson Company argues that it is in the organization's best interest to discourage the wasteful practice of "face time," because, "When you start to measure impact and not hours you find you have a tremendous boost in productivity..." (Scott, 1995, p. 40).

Competence. Competence reflects "the degree to which a person can perform task activities skillfully when he or she tries" (Thomas & Velthouse , 1990, p.672). A strong feeling of competence may also alleviate some of the pressures of overwork. For example, people who feel competent at their job may not take as long to complete their work, may not be as overwhelmed by their job requirements, and consequently, may feel less overworked. If employees are highly competent at what they do, it may also be easier for them to cut back on their hours or find more efficient ways to do things. Finally, competence may give employees more credibility in the organization which in turn can increase the options they have for dealing with overwork (for example, more flexible work schedules, telecommuting).

While the above discussion suggests that each of the four dimensions of empowerment may reduce feelings of overwork, no empirical research has been conducted on the relationship between empowerment and overwork. Future research should consider the following questions pertaining to this relationship.

Research Question #2: How does empowerment reduce overwork? Consider a basic model in which objective overwork contributes to the subjective experience of overwork which leads to individual outcomes (Sutton & Kahn, 1987, Katz and Kahn, 1978). The empowerment dimensions may influence this process at various points. For example, competence might reduce

the actual number of hours worked while self-determination may help individuals feel less overworked. Meaning and impact may moderate whether individuals experience strain as a result of feeling overworked. If their work is meaningful and has impact, they may be willing to put up with feeling overworked. More research needs to be done in order to untangle the processes by which empowerment influences overwork.

To answer this research question, researchers should collect data on the actual number of hours worked and the subjective experience of overwork. They should also collect data on key individual outcomes of interest such as stress or productivity and the four dimensions of empowerment. Then, researchers can empirically test which of the four dimensions of empowerment mediate or moderate the relationships between objective overwork, subjective overwork, and individual outcomes. Regression or LISREL analyses should help to flesh out empirically a path model linking these different constructs. Such research will be critical for establishing the relationship between empowerment and overwork.

Research Question #3: Under what conditions will empowerment alleviate or contribute to perceptions of overwork? Future research should consider the factors that moderate the effect of empowerment on overwork. One factor that may facilitate empowerment's effect on overwork might be the kind of empowerment initiative the organization undertakes. According to Quinn and Spreitzer (1997), executives take two very different approaches to the empowerment of their employees. One approach views empowerment as a mechanistic process in which managers clarify the company's vision, delegate responsibility, provide workers with the necessary information and resources to do their specific tasks, and allow employees limited decision-making control. The other approach views

empowerment as an organic process in which employees are encouraged to grow and take risks. Managers using this "organic approach" understand the needs of their employees and create a trusting and supportive environment. We propose that the organic model of empowerment will be more successful at alleviating overwork because it operates on an intrinsic level by influencing employees' perceptions and feelings. Through the organic approach, managers can ensure that employees have more flexibility in how they do their work, design employees' work so that they find it more meaningful, resist organizational pressures to evaluate workers on face time rather than actual contributions, and invest in employee training so that they feel more competent. Despite the complexity and difficulty of this, we believe that an organic approach to empowerment will increase the possibility that empowerment can alleviate overwork.

On the other hand, there are several conditions under which organizations' efforts at empowerment may actually contribute to feelings of overwork. First, in many organizations, empowerment is often implemented in conjunction with downsizing efforts. The organization rationalizes that the surviving employees are "empowered" because they are assigned the responsibilities formerly assigned to the victims of the downsizing. Invariably, employees feel overworked (Mishra, Spreitzer, & Mishra, forthcoming). Unless work is taken out of the organization through programs like General Electric's much publicized "work-out" program, empowerment implemented in conjunction with downsizing is likely to lead to feelings of overwork.

Second, unless managers change the structure and processes of the organization to become more empowering, many organizations' efforts at implementing empowerment will lead to feelings of overwork. All too often managers will declare that employees are empowered, but do little to change the culture, structure, and processes necessary to make empowerment work

(Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997). Employees may begin to see the empowerment program as a farce designed to get people to work longer hours without more pay. In such cases, employees are likely to see empowerment as more of a burden than an opportunity and are likely to feel overworked.

In order to assess this research question, researchers should interview employees to determine what contextual factors exist surrounding the empowerment program. Has the organization changed the structure and processes of the organization to facilitate empowerment? Does the organization take an organic approach to empowerment? Have work-out programs been developed to reduce the amount of unnecessary work? Has the organization implemented an empowerment program in conjunction with an organization downsizing? Then researchers could look for themes regarding how organizational contextual factors shape the relationship between empowerment and overwork. Are some of these contextual conditions always associated with more empowerment and fewer feelings of overwork? Are others frequently associated with less empowerment and more feelings of overwork?

Research Question #4: Are some individuals more likely to feel overworked when empowered? Some individuals may feel uncomfortable with notions of empowerment, and thus, feel overwhelmed instead of energized. Those with low "growth-need strength" (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) may not want enriched jobs but rather may want more narrow, precise jobs with little ambiguity. "Individuals with low needs for growth may not value empowerment or may even find it threatening and balk at being 'pushed' or stretched too far by their work" (p.85). Such individuals may not be interested in having more choice in how they do their jobs. Thus empowerment may feel more like a burden than an enriching opportunity. Similarly, individuals

in some cultures may not desire empowerment. In some Asian cultures, employees have been conditioned to believe in the importance of hierarchical control. In these cultures, employees are likely to work many hours without complaint. For example, Japanese managers tend to work very long hours on a regular basis. Embracing empowerment would be very difficult for such employees and they may see empowerment as a more of burden than an opportunity.

Thus, future research must examine whether certain individual personality traits and cultural values are likely to result in empowered individuals feeling more overworked than revitalized. Researchers should collect data on individual empowerment and perceptions of overwork as described in earlier research questions. They should also collect data on relevant personality characteristics such as growth-need strength. Then researchers could examine whether personality type moderates the relationship between empowerment and overwork. Similarly, researchers could collect empowerment and overwork data from individuals in different cultures. Then, they could assess whether the magnitude and direction of the relationship between empowerment and overwork varied by culture.

While there are other possible levers for reducing overwork, we chose to emphasize empowerment for several reasons. Unlike some solutions focused on reducing hours without reducing pay, implementing employee empowerment is a more practical and viable strategy for companies. Second, unlike more narrow work-family programs geared toward reducing overwork for employed parents, empowerment would conceivably reduce the potential for overwork for all employees, even those without children. Single and married workers without children are beginning to resent all of the money and energy companies are investing in work-family programs. They also resent the greater flexibility working parents are granted and the underlying expectation that childless workers should pick up the slack for those with children

(Madigan, 1997). Because the potential benefits of empowerment would not favor workers with children over childless workers, empowerment may be a more desirable lever for alleviating the problems of overwork.

In summary, these four research questions identify some important areas for future research. They address some of the key issues pertaining to overwork from the perspective of both academics and practitioners.

CONCLUSION

Given the current business environment, overwork is an issue that will not diminish in the near future. Employees and employers will continue to be challenged by the need to get more work done in organizations at a faster rate and with lower costs. An unfortunate consequence of this is that employees are feeling more overworked than ever before. In the long run, this overwork is likely to have deleterious effects on employees in terms of work-life balance and family relations, but also on organizations in terms of productivity and burnout. As such it is critical that organizations begin to identify levers for reducing the dysfunctional aspects of overwork. We suggest that empowerment may be one such lever – by giving employees choice and flexibility over when and how they work, by helping them infuse personal meaning into their work, by ensuring that their work has impact, and by enhancing their sense of competence, the dysfunctional aspects of overwork may be lessened. In addition to finding levers which may alleviate overwork, research in this area promises to inform the academic discussion on overload, stress, and even work-family conflict. The agenda for research presented in this chapter provides some important avenues for those interested in exploring the theoretical and practical issues related to overwork.

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