FROM OVERWORKED AND ILL TO OVERWORKED AND OK: HOW SUPPORT CAN ALTER WORK-STRESS

Associate Professor Amanda Shantz from Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin along with Professor Kerstin Alfes from ESCP Europe Wirtschaftshochschule Berlin and Professor Adrian Ritz of the University of Bern, reveal the impact of support on the workplace stress-health relationship.

From the paper by Alfes K, Shantz AD, Ritz A 'A multilevel examination of the relationship between role overload and employee subjective health: The buffering effect of support climates. Hum Resour Manage. 2017;1–15'.

ON THE POINT OF EXPLODING

Welcome to today. Where terms such as ‘burnout’, ‘overworked’ ‘collapse’ and ‘combustion’ have entered the everyday employee lexicon, and where social media and news streams are full of examples of organisations that exploit their employees, employees calling it quits, and of industrial unrest arising from the race for corporate performance and profit at the expense of employee health and wellbeing.

While history is ripe with accounts of jobs
that are strenuous and unimaginably taxing on employees, it is only in the past few decades that both the physical and the mental aspects of job overload have been brought into the picture. The presence of support at workplaces is believed to ameliorate the impact of job overload on employees’ subjective health, but the occupational health literature has struggled with the question of whether and what types of support buffer the job stress-health relationship.

As healthcare costs related to employee stressors take up greater space in national pockets, nipping the problem in the bud might be a more efficient solution. A recent study estimated that health care costs resulting from workplace stressors in the United States constitute more than $180 billion a year, not including indirect costs such as reduced employee productivity, absenteeism, and worker compensation expenses. Likewise, in the United Kingdom, the OECD estimates mental health costs to amount to £70 billion annually, including lost productivity, social benefits, and health care. And in Switzerland, again according to the OECD figures, ill health represents a cost of roughly 3.2% of the Gross Domestic Product through lost productivity, and increased health care and social spending.

Previous research paints an ambiguous picture with regards to the belief that support alleviates the detrimental effects of job overload on employee health. However, Prof. Amanda Shantz and her fellow researchers dissect this relationship to establish a more distinct link between the different kinds of support at the disposal of an employee, and their consequent buffering effect on the job overload-subjective health relationship.

ROLES OVERLOAD THROUGH THE MICROSCOPE

What does role overload imply? Role overload describes employees’ perceptions that work demands exceed their available time, resources and/or capacity. Faced with such a conflict, under stressful conditions, employees either mobilise mental effort to maintain high performance or they accept a reduction in their performance level. If they choose to maintain their performance, the compensatory effort required to deal with the increased demands is associated with additional physiological and psychological costs. Over time, the mobilisation of compensatory effort drains employees’ energy, resulting in ill health.

Shantz et al. conducted their study within the state administration of Bern in Switzerland, one of the first Swiss states to transform its civil servants to the principles of New Public Management in order to cut costs and reduce public spending. These changes involved the emulation of private sector management practices and imposed challenges to the traditional “public-sector” employment model – meaning that for many employees, demands for greater efficiency and better service delivery resulted in higher workloads, mounting levels of pressure and stress, and lower job quality. Unsurprisingly, such a context was an ideal setting for Prof. Shantz’ research.

THE FEEL-GOOD FACTOR AND THE TEAM

It probably comes as little surprise that this study found that employees who felt overloaded at work also reported lower health outcomes. The purpose of this study was to determine what types of support are best able to buffer that relationship, or to reduce the negative effect of workload on employee health. The researchers considered three sources of support: support from the organisation, from the direct leader and from fellow team members. The results at the individual level of analysis showed that while support from the organisation and team helped employees, support from the leader did not.

At the group-level, the study revealed that supportive organisational and leadership climates did not buffer the effect of role-overload on subjective health. On the other hand, the calming effect of team climate was significant. Individuals who work in teams characterised by high cohesiveness – harmonious relations and a shared commitment to team goals – reported better health throughout. As it turns out, team climate turned out to be the strongest buffer on the relationship between work overload and subjective health.

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<td>INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL PERCEPTION</td>
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Indeed, individuals who feel overloaded at work benefit from belonging to a team that shares the belief that all team members want to be part of a team and that they stand in for each other, i.e. a strong team climate. A group member is likely to feel safer, more supported and confident in such a climate. It follows that a positive team climate alleviates the relationship between work-related pressure and individual experiences of strain.

Analyses revealed that the negative effect of role overload on individuals’ health was reduced by 35% points when team climate was strong and positive. This finding is crucial for HR professionals, as it shows that a supportive team climate has meaningful implications for individuals’ subjective health.

SEEKING COMFORT IN THE ARMS OF YOUR TEAM

An explanation for the clout team climate carries could be the extent to which the support in question is close to the individuals who need it. Simply explained, an employee who feels overwhelmed and overworked may find more comfort in the members of the workgroup, especially when they share a strong team climate. Approaching a leader or representatives of the organisation (such as the HR department) in times of stress may be difficult, as the leader and/or organization is often to blame for high demands. As such, employees are more likely to blame their organization and/or leader for the intense work situation and the resulting health implications and fall back on support from colleagues to deal with this situation.

NIPPING THE PROBLEM IN THE BUD

Though not completely new, for HR professionals this finding may come like a beacon of light in times where the curtains on employee mistreatments from many superstar companies – Amazon, Tesla to name but a few – are lifting. While wistful dreams of overload-free days seem ideal, they nevertheless seem far. Meanwhile, as organisations struggle with overload, they could benefit from ensuring that individuals enjoy a positive and supportive team climate so that even when overworked, employees may still have good health.

In practical terms, organisations need to be aware that increased work efforts ultimately lead to employee ill-health. As such, managers and HR professionals needs to invest in team development to foster a supportive and trusting atmosphere within teams. To do so, teams could be provided with sufficient autonomy to make group-based decisions on how to structure and carry out their work. Organisations can also increase team cohesiveness by facilitating team members’ interpersonal attraction to one another, for example, by planning social interactions among team members (e.g., joint coffee breaks, social events), inviting guest speakers to give lunch talks or providing yoga classes to workgroups. Ensuring that each member is integrated in the workgroup through regular interaction may increase feelings of being supported.

This can be best witnessed in the behaviour of Amazon warehouse workers as they clamoured for their rights to unionise following the revelation of Amazon warehouses’ outlandish work practices and claustrophobic workloads. Weren’t the workers simply seeking comfort in the arms of their team workers? All in all, the evidence points to HR professionals having to wade through the growing flood of work overload we face.

References:
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