A review of research on extreme jobs: long hours, intense effort, high challenge

... why do people do it, and what are the consequences ... ?

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How do they manage?
A study of the realities of middle and front line management work in healthcare

Charlotte Gascoigne: May 2012
When Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce identified the phenomenon of ‘extreme jobs’ in 2006, they compared them to extreme sports, because job holders described similar challenges and adrenaline rush. These authors characterized as ‘extreme’ the work done by highly paid professionals and managers who dedicated long hours to their work - people who enjoyed the intense, demanding, fast paced, high-impact jobs which they had chosen.

The key dimension of an extreme job is that the job holder works at least 60 hours per week, but Hewlett and Luce define a job as extreme only if it displays other characteristics which make it particularly intense. In addition to long hours, an extreme job must have at least five of the following characteristics: unpredictable work patterns, fast pace with tight deadlines, 24/7 availability to clients, broad scope of responsibility (equivalent to more than one job), mentoring or recruitment responsibility, work-related events outside regular hours, responsibility for profit and loss, lots of travel, many direct reports, and the need to be present at work for at least ten hours a day.

There are four sets of factors that make work extreme: socio-economic, occupational, organizational, and individual. In practice, these forces interact with each other, creating a complex mix of motivations, which may not be individually well articulated, but which can form part of the ‘taken-for-granted’ conditions in a given context.

Socio-economic drivers

*Gendered social structures*: Job design has not caught up with the trend for dual-earner couples. Jobs are still designed for two people - an ‘ideal worker’ who works long hours and prioritizes work above all else, and a domestic partner who takes care of fluctuating personal, family and community needs. Work and life are separate spheres, and employers are only concerned with work. Even when organizational policy recognizes employee commitments outside work, the organizational culture may not match.

*Globalization*: Globalization has intensified competition in many sectors. So, organizations cut costs, and work becomes more intense.

*Technological change*: Technology has also increased work intensity, reducing ‘downtime’ for many employees, and creating an ‘always on’ culture.

*Free market economics*: Long working hours also stem from a socio-economic system that prioritizes market needs over social needs, emphasizing the over-riding importance of market growth. This world view, dominant in the UK since the 1980s, encourages ‘light-touch’ employment regulation, decline in union membership, and belief in individual choice.

*Faith in market mechanisms and personal choice*: Competitive markets are seen as the fairest and most efficient determinant of working hours, based on the assumption that people will choose to stop working when they become less productive, or when their health is threatened (or ‘hazard pay’ makes unsociable hours or unhealthy conditions more acceptable).

*Consumerism*: The term ‘selfish capitalism’ describes a socio-economic system which encourages the maximization of earnings, based on the belief that consumption is the best way to meet human needs. The result is a cycle of work and spend: organizations create consumer desire for their goods, and encourage long working hours among their employees. Those employees are also consumers, whose long working hours will increase their salaries, thus enabling them to buy more material goods.
Occupational drivers

Professional commitment and identity: Professional work serves a socially useful purpose. It is defined not by hours, but by the ‘heroic’ commitment of driven professionals, who put work before personal life. Professional identity is therefore threatened by setting limits on hours. Those who work shorter hours are marginalized.

Occupational communities: Different groups develop different time norms. In some occupations, the nature of work (job characteristics) interacts with the nature of those who are attracted to the work (personality traits) to escalate working hours through ‘social contagion’.

Job characteristics: Many professionals believe that the intrinsic nature of their work requires long hours - necessary due to fast pace, unpredictability, interdependent tasks, and a high need for interaction with colleagues and clients.

Work organization: Management-centred and expertise-centred coordination allow less time flexibility than team-centred coordination, where group members are more interchangeable and have overlapping skill sets. Sharing tasks and organizing handovers can increase time flexibility, while exclusive, individual relationships with clients have the opposite effect.

Organizational drivers

High performance work systems: Empowerment, mentoring, employee involvement, teamworking, training and development, high salaries, performance-related pay and fringe benefits can all increase organizational commitment and encourage longer working hours.

Organizational identification: This is achieved through organizational culture and rhetoric, managing the ‘hopes, fears and aspirations’ of workers, as well as managing behaviour through traditional bureaucratic control. The sense of belonging to an elite increases willingness to work hard. Very high pay has the same effect.

Performance measurement: It is difficult to measure the intangible outputs of managers and professionals, so hours worked are often used as a proxy for performance.

Competitive presenteeism: Where it is hard to measure outputs, promotion goes to those who work longer hours, especially in ‘up or out’ organization cultures.

Ineffective work-life balance initiatives: Policies are often ‘bolted on’ to deeper organization structures (job design, organizational culture) which promote long hours.

Individual drivers

Work is central to identity: Work can be a source of affiliation and self-respect, possibly more important than community, family, gender or class. Individuals need to actively manage work-life boundaries in order to resist over-identification with work.

Personal choice: Choosing work-life balance or shorter hours is a personal choice, which may involve loss of professional identity, and challenges the free market consumer culture.

Extrinsic motivations: Salary, status and material goods.

Intrinsic motivations: When we enjoy and value our work, as part of our identity, we invest more time, and become passionately engaged, leading to fulfilment and personal growth.

Workaholism: On the other hand, long working hours can be an unhealthy addiction, driven by perfectionism, narcissism, or the need for approval, involving a reluctance or an inability to disengage from work.
Extreme jobs bring benefits. Long hours and intense effort can lead to higher short-term productivity, which feeds into economic growth, and all the social benefits which that brings. Extreme jobbers maximize their opportunities for promotion and career progress, which in turn leads to higher salary, material rewards, and personal development through even more challenging work. Even if no promotion is forthcoming, doing a job you love can bring personal fulfilment and wellbeing through the intrinsic satisfactions of work.

However, extreme jobs indirectly discriminate against women, who retain most of the responsibility for family and domestic work. The impact on physical and psychological health, including addiction, and work-life balance, can be severe. For the organization, an extreme jobs culture can lead to the loss of expensively developed talent, much of it female: cumulatively, this represents a significant cost to the economy. Further individual and social costs include the neglect of activities essential for human sustainability and wellbeing - family, community, education, leisure, active citizenship. Finally, the long-term effect of extreme working on productivity is not fully researched, but is thought to be negative.

If you have a view on any these issues, please let us know.

Key sources


The research

This study is based on interviews and focus groups with middle and senior managers, on a management survey, and on case studies exploring how changes are managed in the aftermath of serious incidents.

Participating trusts

- Bedford Hospital NHS Trust
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