

# Over work in America

When the Way We Work  
Becomes Too Much

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## Executive Summary

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 this 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%) did 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.

## Overwork in America: When the Way We Work Becomes Too Much

### BACKGROUND

In 2001, Families and Work Institute (FWI) conducted a seminal study in collaboration with Harris Interactive® to better understand the phenomenon of being overworked.<sup>10</sup> The study was undertaken in response to a number of changes that FWI and others had observed in society and in the workplace:

- The impact of stress and how long and hard people were working was becoming a hot topic in workplaces, among business leaders, the public, and the press.
- Being overworked was being seen as a “red badge of courage” by employees, who one-upped each other about how many hours they were working each day. Feeling overworked was also a subterranean but profound source of their own anxiety. Comments about fellow employees who were felled by heart attacks or other stress-related illnesses or about anti-anxiety and depression medications becoming as commonplace as aspirin were spreading through workplaces like gossip storms.
- 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 more common than anticipated and were associated with the highest medical plan costs of all behavioral health disorders.<sup>11</sup>
- Research from FWI’s 1997 National Study of the Changing Workforce revealed that 1 in 4 employees (26%) was feeling burned out or stressed by their jobs *often* or *very often*. Furthermore, this study revealed that job conditions associated with job burnout, such as long hours and a demanding and hectic work pace, were on the rise.<sup>12</sup>
- Ellen Galinsky’s 1999 research from the first nationally representative study to investigate how children felt about their employed fathers and mothers, *Ask the Children*, revealed a surprising finding: When asked their one wish to improve how their mother’s and father’s work affected their lives, most children wished for their mothers and fathers to be less stressed and less tired—a finding that received worldwide attention.<sup>13</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>14</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>15</sup>

Investigating this phenomenon of “being overworked” was a perfect research project for Families and Work Institute. Our mission is to be ahead of the curve, to identify issues of critical societal and economic importance as they begin to crest, and to provide rigorous scientific data to inform debate, discussion and action.

One of the most challenging tasks we faced in conducting the 2001 study was to define what it means to be overworked. While many researchers have skirted around this issue—focusing mainly on hours worked—few have defined or investigated the psychological state of “feeling overworked,” which we equate with “being” overworked. Although we agree that there are important observable indicators of being overworked, we hold that being or feeling overworked is a psychological state, with origins in one’s experience and consequences for other psychological states and behavior. Since there were no established measures, we had to develop our own. Guided by findings from focus groups, we developed a series of questions that seemed to best capture what employees were saying. Ultimately after conducting factor analyses, we selected three of the questions to serve as primary indicators of being overworked:<sup>16</sup> How often have you...

- Felt overworked?
- Felt overwhelmed by how much work you have to do?
- Felt that you haven’t had the time to step back and process or reflect on the work you’re doing?

Our analyses revealed that in 2001, 1 in 3 U.S. employees was experiencing this as a chronic condition. We were also able to identify some of the factors that lead to being overworked and understand 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. Even in 2004, we received calls about this study on a weekly basis. Thus, we decided that it was time to conduct the study again, updating it with various new measures.

We also felt that it was time to explore in greater depth a “sleeper issue” in the 2001 study—the relationship between vacations and being overworked. In 2001, one of the many factors associated with being overworked was not taking one’s full vacation. It was simply one question among many we had asked, yet it was an issue that lingered and was the focus of many of the inquiries we received about the study. So when we designed *Overwork in America*, we added a second purpose through a series of questions to investigate the vacation benefits available to American workers, how they are taking their vacations, and whether and how vacations make a difference in the health and well-being of the workforce.

Data for this report come from telephone interviews with a representative sample of 1,003 wage and salaried adult employees in the U.S. workforce. For further information about the study methodology, please see page 51.

## PART I: OVERWORK IN AMERICA

### How Pervasive Is Being Overworked in 2004?

The first question is whether employees are overworked, and if so, how overworked. The findings presented in Table 1 reveal that:

- 26 percent of employees felt overworked *often* or *very often* in the last month;
- 27 percent were overwhelmed by how much work they had to do *often* or *very often* in the last month; and
- 29 percent *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 say they *rarely* or *never* experienced any of these three indices.

If we include employees who were overworked at least *sometimes*, the proportion of employees who are overworked increases substantially:

- 54 percent felt overworked at least *sometimes* in the last month;
- 54 percent were overwhelmed by how much work they had to do at least *sometimes* in the last month; and
- 52 percent did not have time to step back and process or reflect on the work they were doing at least *sometimes* in the last month.

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.*

*One-third of all U.S. employees can be viewed as being chronically overworked.*

Table 1: Being Overworked

<i>In the Last Month, How Often Have You...</i>	U.S. Employees
Felt Overworked?	(n=995)
Very Often	<b>10%</b>
Often	<b>16</b>
Sometimes	28
Rarely	22
Never	23
Felt Overwhelmed by How Much You Have to Do at Work?	(n=996)
Very Often	<b>11%</b>
Often	<b>16</b>
Sometimes	27
Rarely	24
Never	22
Felt that You Don't Have the Time to Step Back and Process or Reflect on the Work You're Doing?	(n=990)
Very Often	<b>9%</b>
Often	<b>20</b>
Sometimes	23
Rarely	25
Never	24
Average Score for Being Overworked:	2.7

*ns = not significant; \* = p < .05; \*\* = p < .01; \*\*\* = p < .001*

*Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.*

### Are Employees More Overworked in 2004 than in 2001?

When we conducted the study in 2001, we asked employees about being overworked over the past 3 months, but we changed the time frame in 2004 to the past 1 month because we used several new standardized outcome measures (such as depression and stress) that have a 1-month reference period. Thus, we can't make direct statistical comparisons between 2001 and 2004 on "being overworked" because of this difference in the time frame. However, as the percentages below reveal, there are no appreciable differences between what employees reported in 2001 for the past 3 months and in 2004 for the past month. In 2001, we found that:

- 28% of employees felt overworked *often* or *very often* in the past 3 months versus 26% in 2004;

- 28% were overwhelmed by how much work they had to do *often* or *very often* in the past 3 months versus 27% in 2004; and
- 29% *often* or *very often* didn't have time to step back and process or reflect on the work they were doing during the past 3 months, the same proportion as in 2004.

Furthermore, the average score for being overworked in 2001 and 2004 is the same: 2.7, suggesting that the average employee is *sometimes* 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 is 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.

As shown in Table 2, 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.

*The more overworked employees are, the more likely they are to make mistakes at work, feel angry at their employers for expecting them to do too much and resent coworkers who do not work as hard as they do.*

Although this study didn't explore the issue of career advancement, a recent analysis of data from the 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>17</sup>

**Table 2: Work-related Outcomes during the Past Month by Levels of Being Overworked**

	Levels of Being Overworked			Sig.
	Low	Medium	High	
Made Mistakes at Work Because You Have Too Much to Do	(n=339)	(n=339)	(n=316)	***
Rarely/Never	94%	74%	48%	
Sometimes	6	22	32	
Often/Very Often	0	4	20	
Felt Angry that You Were Expected to Do So Much at Work	(n=339)	(n=340)	(n=319)	***
Rarely/Never	90%	66%	34%	
Sometimes	9	29	27	
Often/Very Often	1	6	39	
Felt Resentful That Coworkers Do Not Work as Hard as You Do	(n=339)	(n=336)	(n=318)	***
Rarely/Never	75%	53%	41%	
Sometimes	13	30	25	
Often/Very Often	12	18	34	

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

### 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.

As shown in Table 3, 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 overworked employees are, the more likely they are to experience high levels of stress, to experience symptoms of clinical depression, to have poorer health, and to neglect caring for themselves.*

- The more likely they are to report that their health is poorer. Fifty-two percent of employees experiencing high overwork levels 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.

**Table 3. Personal Outcomes during Past Month by Levels of Being Overworked**

	Levels of Being Overworked			Sig.
	Low	Medium	High	
<b>Stress</b>	(n=338)	(n=338)	(n=320)	***
Low Levels	67%	44%	19%	
Medium Levels	28	43	45	
High Levels	<b>6</b>	13	<b>36</b>	
<b>Depression</b>	(n=335)	(n=335)	(n=313)	***
Low Levels	78%	68%	54%	
Medium Levels	14	22	25	
High Levels	<b>8</b>	11	<b>21</b>	
<b>Overall Health</b>	(n=337)	(n=339)	(n=319)	**
Poor	5%	10%	9%	
Fair	30	38	39	
Good	<b>65</b>	52	<b>52</b>	
<b>Success in Taking Care of Themselves</b>	(n=339)	(n=339)	(n=316)	***
Not Successful	2%	5%	8%	
Somewhat Successful	30	47	52	
Very Successful	<b>68</b>	48	<b>41</b>	

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

## Validity and Utility of Individual Perceptions

Although there are clearly strong statistical links between being overworked and the outcomes we report above, might these findings all relate to personality? In other words, might the type of person who reports being overworked be the type of person who also makes mistakes at work? And which is the cause and which is the effect? Do symptoms of clinical depression result from or act as the catalyst for being overworked? In other words, do these results really matter? Are they solid enough for employees, employers and society to consider taking action?

Since this study (and other survey research) relies entirely upon self-reported information from individuals, it is important to address these questions.

It is well established that different people are “calibrated” somewhat differently; that is, their individual perceptions of the same external situations and events vary. One might argue that we are all biased in our perceptions and that argument would be true to an extent.

However—and this is the important point—research demonstrates that the perceptions that different people have of the same situations and events are quite similar as indicated by typically moderate to high correlations. This is true whether one compares perceptions among coworkers<sup>20</sup> or the perceptions of individual employees with those of managers.<sup>21</sup> For example, when individuals in a work group are asked about what it is like to work in that specific work group, their responses are similar enough to be statistically correlated.

In addition, when information for a group of individuals is analyzed, both the individuals’ self-perceptions of their situation and the perceptions that others have of their situation have been found to be similarly predictive of, for example, mental health (e.g., anxiety or depression) and physical health (e.g., coronary heart disease) for given individuals.<sup>22</sup> In other words, if the individual’s own rating of the work situation is removed from the analyses and the group perception (minus the individual employee’s) is used, the group’s perceptions of the work situation is statistically predictive of whether or not that individual is experiencing anxiety or depression.

Furthermore, longitudinal research has found that employees who work in environments with high work demands, little autonomy and little support are more likely to experience health problems over time.<sup>23</sup>

In the end, individual perceptions are the only way to assess how individuals “experience their world.” Psychological phenomena, such as “being” or “feeling” overworked, cannot be observed by someone from the outside. Rather, researchers must rely on individuals to describe what goes on within them, use various and multiple questions to measure the same attitude or experience, and study responses across large groups of individuals in order to understand how such psychological constructs as “being overworked” are related to external conditions and outcomes.

Since 1 in 3 U.S. employees reports being chronically overworked, and since those employees are more likely to make mistakes at work, to feel angry at their employers and resent their coworkers, and to experience higher levels of depression and stress and poorer health, these results, in our view, do matter a great deal.

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

There are many factors that have led to the new ways Americans are working today. Chief among these are:

- changes in the world’s economy—that it is global, 24/7, and fiercely competitive;
- changes in the labor force—that it is more diverse and that it is aging; and
- changes in work itself—that technology is blurring the lines between when we are working and when we are not.

Organizations, large and small, are much more subject to change today than in the recent past, as is the nature of work itself.

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. Not surprisingly, this study finds such correlations, as seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Factors Associated with Being Overworked

Level of Being Overworked	Total Hours Worked per Week at Main or Only Job				Sig.
	1 - 34 (n=153)	35 - 40 (n=392)	41 - 50 (n=308)	More than 50 (n=140)	
High	21%	26%	40%	46%	***
Medium	32	36	36	25	
Low	47	38	24	29	

Level of Being Overworked	Working More Hours than Prefer?		Sig.
	No (n=445)	Yes (n=525)	
High	22%	41%	***
Medium	34	35	
Low	45	24	

Level of Being Overworked	Number of Days Worked per Week at Main or Only Job		Sig.
	1 - 5 Days (n=767)	6 - 7 Days (n=222)	
High	27%	49%	***
Medium	36	27	
Low	37	24	

Level of Being Overworked	Working More Days than Prefer?		Sig.
	No (n=421)	Yes (n=563)	
High	20%	41%	***
Medium	34	34	
Low	46	25	

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

Because many people treat *time* worked as the primary indicator (and sometimes as a direct measure) 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. These other factors help to explain why some employees who work relatively few hours feel highly overworked, while others who work very long hours do not feel overworked (Table 4, above). After reviewing the extent to which these other factors are related to being overworked, we will return to the issue of hours worked as a predictor of being overworked.

A particularly important factor 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 the excessive multi-tasking required to keep up with everything 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 these 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.

As shown in Table 5, 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.
- 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.

*Because many people treat time worked as the primary indicator (and sometimes as a direct measure) of being overworked, they overlook other aspects of the way we work that our analyses show are, in fact, more significant.*

**Table 5: Focus**

Levels of Being Overworked	Having to Work on Too Many Tasks at Same Time					Sig.
	Never (n=129)	Rarely (n=183)	Sometimes (n=233)	Often (n=195)	Very Often (n=259)	
High	7%	9%	<b>22%</b>	44%	<b>60%</b>	***
Medium	20	41	40	38	27	
Low	73	50	37	18	12	

Levels of Being Overworked	Frequency of Interruptions Making It Hard to Get Work Done					Sig.
	Never (n=142)	Rarely (n=225)	Sometimes (n=224)	Often (n=178)	Very Often (n=230)	
High	6%	13%	26%	41%	64%	***
Medium	20	38	46	38	25	
Low	73	49	28	21	11	

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

## 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>24</sup> Put simply, in many organizations, there is simply more work to do, often with 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 experience high overwork levels versus only 4 percent of those who experience low levels of job pressure and 18 percent who experience mid levels of pressure (Table 6).

Clearly job pressure and being overworked go hand in hand.

**Table 6: Job Pressure**

Levels of Being Overworked	Job Pressures			Sig.
	Low Levels (n=114)	Medium Levels (n=451)	High Levels (n=431)	
High	4%	18%	54%	***
Medium	38	32	36	
Low	59	50	11	

*ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$*

*Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.*

## Low-value Work

We have also 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 employees 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 (Table 7).

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.

**Table 7: Low-Value Work—Spending a Lot of Time Doing Things that Are a Waste of Time**

Levels of Being Overworked	Disagree (n=710)	Agree (n=287)	Sig.
High	25%	51%	***
Medium	36	28	
Low	39	21	

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

## 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 important 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.

As shown in Table 8, those who are in contact with work once a week or more outside of normal work hours are more overworked than those who have less or no contact.

*Employees who experience more job pressure, who multi-task or are interrupted more frequently, who do more work they consider a waste of time, and who are in contact with work more frequently during times when they are not scheduled to work, are more likely to be overworked.*

**Table 8: Contact Outside of Work Once a Week or More?**

Levels of Being Overworked	No (n=669)	Yes (n=328)	Sig.
High	26%	44%	***
Medium	37	29	
Low	37	27	

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

### Working While on Vacations

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 time are highly overworked versus 55 percent who *often* or *very often* work on vacation who are highly overworked. 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 work during vacation. As with all of these other measures, the way employees work today both results from and leads to being overworked. For more information on vacations and being overworked, please see Part II of this report.

### Internal Labor Market Pressures

Employees often say that when their companies downsize, the amount of work doesn't change. Rather the number of people available to do that work declines so that one person has to do the work that more than one person did in the past. Thus, we evaluated various internal labor market conditions to determine whether they are linked to being overworked. The results are presented in Table 9.

- 29% of employees' organizations had eliminated jobs during the preceding year, and 28% of organizations had difficulty hiring new employees.
- Employees who work for companies that have downsized or have had difficulty hiring new employees feel more overworked than others. For example, 43% of those whose employers had difficulty hiring in the past year experienced high overwork levels versus 27% of those whose employers did not have difficulty hiring. Similarly, 42% of employees in organizations that had downsized in the past year experienced high overwork levels versus 27% in organizations that had not downsized.
- Interestingly, working for companies that have either merged or have upsized does not affect employees' feelings of being overworked.

*Employees who work for organizations that have downsized or that are having trouble hiring new employees are more likely to be overworked.*

Table 9: Internal Labor Market Issues

Levels of Being Overworked	Organization Eliminated Jobs or Downsized in Past Year		Sig.
	No (n=693)	Yes (n=289)	
High	27%	42%	***
Medium	37	29	
Low	36	29	
Levels of Being Overworked	Organization Had Difficulty Hiring People to Fill Positions		Sig.
	No (n=699)	Yes (n=270)	
High	27%	43%	***
Medium	34	35	
Low	39	22	
Levels of Being Overworked	Organization Has Merged with, Acquired, or Been Acquired by Another Company		Sig.
	No (n=853)	Yes (n=130)	
High	33%	29%	ns
Medium	32	42	
Low	35	30	
Levels of Being Overworked	Organization Increased Number of Jobs or Upsized		Sig.
	No (n=547)	Yes (n=418)	
High	35%	30%	ns
Medium	31	37	
Low	34	33	

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

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

In previous research, we have been able to identify a number of factors that are characteristic of an effective workplace—that is, a workplace where both employer and employees fare better. The factors most strongly linked to employee engagement, job satisfaction, retention, and better mental health are:

- Job autonomy;
- Learning opportunities and challenges on the job;
- Supervisor support for job success;
- Coworker support for job success; and
- Involvement in management decision making.

One of the unique contributions of FWI's research is its focus on the employee as a whole person and the inclusion of *workplace flexibility* as a critical component of the effective workplace.<sup>25</sup> We see workplace flexibility as a missing ingredient in effective workplaces for the following reasons:

- Working flexibly calls for the same kind of shared responsibility for achieving business results as the other components of the effective workplace.
- Surveys consistently reveal that employees rate flexibility among the most important workplace policies and practices in helping them succeed both at work and at home.
- FWI's research reveals that flexibility is linked to engagement, retention, job satisfaction and employee well-being.
- Other research also finds that flexibility is a key driver of retention and job satisfaction.

Thus, we wondered to what extent these components of an effective workplace are linked to being overworked.

We found (Table 10) that:

- Employees who have jobs that provide them more opportunities to keep learning new things, 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.
- On the other hand, coworker support for job success and having the freedom to decide what to do on their jobs are not linked with being overworked.

*Employees who have jobs that provide them more opportunities to keep learning new things, 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.*

Table 10: Predictors of an Effective Workplace

Level of Being Overworked	Freedom to Decide What to Do on Own Job		Sig.
	No, Disagree (n=276)	Yes, Agree (n=714)	
High	32%	32%	ns
Medium	39	32	
Low	29	36	
Level of Being Overworked	Job Allow Opportunities to Take the Initiative to Keep Learning New Things		Sig.
	No, Disagree (n=180)	Yes, Agree (n=808)	
High	38%	31%	*
Medium	33	34	
Low	28	35	
Level of Being Overworked	Support from Coworkers to Do a Good Job		Sig.
	No, Disagree (n=118)	Yes, Agree (n=870)	
High	36%	32%	ns
Medium	36	34	
Low	28	35	
Level of Being Overworked	Support from Supervisor to Do a Good Job		Sig.
	No, Disagree (n=128)	Yes, Agree (n=860)	
High	49%	29%	***
Medium	26	36	
Low	25	35	
Level of Being Overworked	Flexibility in Work Time to Manage Personal and Family Responsibilities		Sig.
	No, Disagree (n=213)	Yes, Agree (n=783)	
High	56%	26%	***
Medium	25	37	
Low	19	38	
Level of Being Overworked	Managers Actively Seek Out Information and New Ideas from Employees at All Levels to Guide Decision making		Sig.
	No, Disagree (n=326)	Yes, Agree (n=658)	
High	40%	29%	***
Medium	35	33	
Low	25	38	

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

## 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 have revealed that employees' priorities also make a difference.

From two questions we have created a scale that looks at how employees prioritize the tradeoffs they make between their work and their family or personal life:

- In the past year, how often did you feel that you put your job before your personal and family life?
- In the past year, how often did you feel that you put your personal and family life before your job?

Employees could respond: *very often, often, sometimes, rarely, or never*. We ask two questions (rather than one) because separate questions better capture the complexity of the decisions that employees make. From these two questions, we derived a single index of the degree to which employees prioritize job versus family/personal life. Those who consistently place higher priority on work are considered *work-centric*, those placing higher priority on family/personal life than work are considered *family-centric*, and those placing equivalent priority on work and family/personal life are considered *dual-centric* (for example, they may answer *sometimes, often, or very often* to both questions).

***Employees who are family-centric or dual-centric are less likely to feel overworked than employees who are work-centric.***

In several studies—including a study of the top leadership of ten multi-national companies (*Leaders in a Global Economy*)<sup>26</sup> and our National Study of the Changing Workforce (*Generation & Gender in the Workplace*)<sup>27</sup>—we have found that employees who are dual-centric or family-centric exhibit significantly better mental health, greater satisfaction with their lives, and higher levels of job satisfaction than employees who are work-centric. In our study of global executives, we also found that women who are dual-centric have advanced to higher levels in their companies.

Thus in this study we asked whether employees' work life priorities affect how overworked they are. As shown in Table 11, we found:

- Employees who are family-centric or dual-centric 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. One might assume that putting work first, spending more time and energy on one's job, and getting more done would leave them feeling less overworked, but the opposite is the case.

**Table 11: Work vs. Family/Personal Priorities**

Level of Being Overworked	Work vs. Family/Personal Priorities			Sig.
	Family-centric (n=275)	Dual-centric (n=432)	Work-centric (n=290)	
High	22%	29%	<b>46%</b>	***
Medium	32	36	33	
Low	46	35	<b>20</b>	

*ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$*

*Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.*

### The Relative Importance of Hours Worked as a Predictor of Being Overworked

As previously noted, long work hours are frequently viewed as an indication that someone is overworked. However, as we saw in Table 4 (above) 21% of part-time employees experience high levels of feeling overworked. (Part-time employment is defined as fewer than 35 total paid and unpaid hours per week at one’s main or only job. The average part-time employee works only 24 total hours per week.) Among employees who work more than 50 total hours per week (and an average of 60 hours), 29% experience low levels of feeling overworked. To many it may seem counterintuitive that some employees who work part-time feel highly overworked and that some who work more than 50 hours per week experience low overwork levels. What accounts for these findings?

Although part-time employees only work 24 hours per week on average, the following characteristics of their jobs and workplaces can lead them—like employees in general (above)—to feel overworked: having to work more days per week than they want to; having to work very hard on the job; not having enough time to get everything done on the job; spending a lot of time engaged in low-value work; frequently having to work on too many tasks at the same time; frequently being interrupted making it difficult to get work done; and not having the flexibility to manage work, personal, and family life. Interestingly, employees who work more than 50 hours per week experience low levels of being overworked when the same factors are reversed: not having to work more days per week than they want to; not having to work very hard on the job; having enough time to get everything done on the job; not spending a lot of time engaged in low-value work; infrequently having to work on too many tasks at the same time; infrequently being interrupted making it difficult to get work done; and having the flexibility to manage work, personal, and family life .

In short, the view that all employees who work short hours are not overworked and that all employees who work long hours are overworked is simply not supported by our data. Although hours worked is related to feeling overworked, with employees who work longer hours being more likely than those working shorter hours to feel overworked, the relationship is far from perfect.

Indeed, when we evaluated the relative predictive strength of hours worked per week in a multivariate (stepwise) analysis including all the various aspects of jobs and workplaces examined in this report, hours worked was not identified as a significant predictor of being overworked.

*The view that all employees who work short hours are not overworked and that all employees who work long hours are overworked is simply not supported by our data.*

## 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- and part-time, and employees with different levels of earnings. Results are reported in Table 12.

### 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 contribute to being overworked than do women. However, women report more frequent multi-tasking. When we compared men and women who experience multi-tasking challenges with the same frequency, the observed gender difference in being overworked disappeared.

This finding raises an important question that merits further exploration in the future: Do women experience too much multi-tasking at work because of the specific types of jobs they have and/or because their socialization experiences—including for some women their concurrent experiences off the job as spouses and caretakers—lead them to take on more (potentially conflicting) tasks than men?

### Age

Members of the Baby Boom generation (ages 40-59) 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 employees. All of these factors are associated with being more overworked. When we compared Boomers with other employees with the same work situations, however, the apparent difference between Boomers and others in being overworked disappeared. 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.

However, among those with children, the parents of teenagers are more overworked than parents with younger children. This finding contradicts the popular notion that having younger children clashes more strongly with work, which might lead to being more overworked. Our data cannot fully answer why this is the case, but there are many plausible reasons, including the greater tension that can ensue from dealing with teen issues such as peer pressure or more difficult situations like sex, drugs or violence—as well as the potential conflict between the complex schedules of teens and those of their employed parents.

In addition, we found that employees with elder care responsibilities tend to be more overworked than employees without these responsibilities. Elder care (perhaps somewhat like parenting a teen) is more

difficult to plan for and certainly can be more heart wrenching than other family responsibilities so this finding about elder care is not unexpected—but is noteworthy in light of the growing prevalence of elder care responsibilities among U.S. workers. According to FWI’s recent research, including this study, between 3 and 4 in 10 employees had provided special attention or care for a relative or in-law 65 years old or older in the past year—helping them with things that were difficult or impossible for them to do themselves. Thus, the issue of elder care and being overworked is one that merits employer and societal attention.

## **Occupational Status**

Although this study does not provide detailed information about occupations, it does distinguish between managerial or professional employees and employees in other occupations based on self-classification. Not surprisingly, employees identifying themselves as managers and professionals who typically have jobs with greater responsibilities are more overworked than others.

## **Full-time Versus Part-time Status**

Employees who work part-time are less likely to experience high levels of being overworked (23%) than those who work full-time (34%).

## **Earnings**

Consistent with the pattern we have been seeing, employees with higher earnings who generally have jobs with greater responsibilities are more likely to be overworked than those with lower earnings.

Table 12: Levels of Being Overworked for Different Segments of the Workforce

Level of Being Overworked	Gender		Sig.
	Male (n=530)	Female (n=469)	
High	30%	34%	*
Medium	33	36	
Low	37	30	

  

Level of Being Overworked	Generation				Sig.
	Gen-Y: 18 - 25 (n=142)	Gen-X: 26 - 39 (n=338)	Boomer: 40 - 59 (n=448)	Mature: 60+ (n=53)	
High	28%	29%	37%	21%	*
Medium	27	36	35	34	
Low	45	35	28	45	

  

Level of Being Overworked	Gen-Y? (n=142)		Sig.
	No	Yes	
High	33%	27%	**
Medium	35	28	
Low	32	45	

  

Level of Being Overworked	Gen-X? (n=338)		Sig.
	No	Yes	
High	34%	29%	ns
Medium	33	36	
Low	33	35	

  

Level of Being Overworked	Boomer? (n=448)		Sig.
	No	Yes	
High	28%	37%	***
Medium	34	35	
Low	39	28	

  

Level of Being Overworked	Mature? (n=53)		Sig.
	No	Yes	
High	33%	21%	*
Medium	34	34	
Low	33	45	

Table 12 (continued): Levels of Being Overworked for Different Segments of the Workforce

Level of Being Overworked	Parental Status - # of Children Under 18			Sig.
	None (n=503)	1 Child (n=189)	2+ Children (n=299)	
High	31%	36%	32%	ns
Medium	32	36	36	
Low	37	28	31	
Level of Being Overworked	Parental Status - Age of Youngest Child			Sig.
	Under 6 (n=197)	Ages 6 - 12 (n=159)	Ages 13+ (n=128)	
High	32%	30%	40%	**
Medium	29	47	37	
Low	40	23	23	
Level of Being Overworked	Elder Care Responsibilities		Sig.	
	No	Yes		
High	28%	37%	**	
Medium	36	32		
Low	36	31		
Level of Being Overworked	Occupational Status		Sig.	
	Manager/Professional (n=716)	Other Occupation (n=262)		
High	34%	26%	**	
Medium	35	33		
Low	31	41		
Level of Being Overworked	Full-time/Part-time		Sig.	
	Full-time Job (n=832)	Part-time Job (n=167)		
High	34%	23%	***	
Medium	34	32		
Low	32	45		
Level of Being Overworked	Earnings			Sig.
	\$20,000 or Less (n=212)	\$20,001 - \$50,000 (n=406)	More than \$50,000 (n=123)	
High	26%	32%	39%	**
Medium	33	38	29	
Low	41	31	32	

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

## PART II: VACATIONS AND BEING OVERWORKED

The *Overwork in America* report has two purposes: 1) to re-examine the phenomenon of being overworked that we identified and studied in 2001; and 2) to explore in greater depth an issue that evoked much interest in the 2001 study—vacations and being overworked. We begin by presenting the basic facts about vacation access and use: How much vacation do employees have and take; which employees are most likely to have access to vacations; what is the longest vacation employees take and for what purpose. We then review how employees spend their vacations, including who works on their vacations and how they feel when they return from their vacations. Finally, we discuss how taking vacations relate to being overworked.

### How Much Vacation Do U.S. Employees Take?

#### Vacation Access and Use

As shown in Table 13, we found that:

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

Note that this study was conducted in the late fall of 2004 (October - November), so employees could have a good idea of their vacation usage for that year.

The most important finding about how U.S. employees use their vacation is:

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

When we asked those who were not planning to take their full vacations whether that was because of pressures on the job, 21 percent said “yes.” Although our questions did not *directly* capture other reasons, we did seek to identify other factors that are associated with not using all of one’s accrued vacation. Interestingly, many factors that one might suspect would be associated are not significant—for example, occupational status, earnings, hours worked per week, job demands, and the relative emphasis one puts on work and family/personal life. However, the following demographic characteristics are significantly related:

- Young employees (ages 18-25), who are less likely to have paid vacation and receive fewer days when they do have it, are more likely than all but employees over 60 to use all the vacation for which they are eligible.
- Employees who are married or living with someone as a couple are somewhat more likely (66%) to use all of their vacation than employees who are single (57%).
- Employees with 2 or more children are less likely (54%) to use all of their vacation time than employees without children (69%) or with 1 child (65%). This does not appear to be a function of financial constraints on larger families, though family per capita income declines substantially as family size increases. It may simply be logistically more difficult to plan and implement vacations when one has more children.

**Table 13: Vacation Access and Use**

Access to Paid Vacation Days (n=995)	
Yes	79%
No	21

  

Among Those with Paid Vacation, How Many Days Accrue in 2004? (n=743)	
1 Workweek or Less	13%
Up to 2 Weeks	19
Up to 3 Weeks	27
More than 3 Weeks	41
Average Number of Days Accruing	<b>16.6 days</b>
Median Number of Days Accruing	15 days

  

Among Those with Paid Vacation, How Many Days Already Taken in 2004? (n=761)	
1 Workweek or Less	37%
Up to 2 Weeks	24
Up to 3 Weeks	22
More than 3 Weeks	17
Average Number of Days Already Taken	<b>10.3 days</b>
Median Number of Days Already Taken	8 days

  

Among Those with Vacation Benefits, How Many Days Taken or Planned in 2004? (n=761)	
1 Workweek or Less	21%
Up to 2 Weeks	21
Up to 3 Weeks	24
More than 3 Weeks	34
Average Number of Days Taken or Planned	<b>14.6 days</b>
Median Number of Days Taken or Planned	14 days

  

Among Those with Paid Vacation, How Many Have Used or Plan to Use All Days? (n=731)	
Will Not Use All Days	<b>36%</b>
Will Use All Days	64

  

Among Those Not Using All Vacation Days, Do They Use Fewer Days Than the Number for Which They Are Eligible Because of Job Pressures? (n=265)	
Yes, Because of Job Pressures	21%
No, Other Reasons	79

*Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.*

### Employees with Access to Vacation Benefits

Tenure is strongly related to the amount of paid vacation days employees receive, as shown in Table 14.

**Table 14: Job Tenure and Vacations**

Vacation Benefits and Use	Job Tenure				Sig.
	1 Year or Less	2 - 5 Years	6 - 12 Years	13 or More Years	
Receive Paid Vacation Days? (n=992)					***
No	43%	18%	18%	9%	
Yes	57	82	82	91	
Among Those with Paid Vacation Days, Number of Paid Vacation Days Annually (n=741)					***
1 Workweek of Less	38%	11%	10%	4%	
Up to 2 Workweeks	30	28	17	7	
Up to 3 Workweeks	19	35	41	11	
Up to 4 Workweeks	6	12	11	26	
More than 4 Workweeks	7	15	21	52	

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

In addition, managers and professionals and more highly paid employees receive more vacation. For example:

- 48% of those who earn \$20,000 or less annually have access to a paid vacation compared with 91% of those who earn \$50,000 or more.

### How Do Employees Use Their Vacations?

#### 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 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 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.

When other forms of paid leave are not available for addressing family matters, using paid vacation days may be the only alternative.

In addition, employees were asked what percentage of their time on vacations were spent for relaxing or for meeting family responsibilities:

- Employees with the most demanding jobs spend less time (63% of their vacation time) just relaxing and enjoying themselves on vacation than other employees.
- Employees with children are more likely to use their vacations (24%) meeting family responsibilities than other employees (14%).
- Lastly, employed parents with younger children are more likely to use their vacations meeting family responsibilities than those with older children: 31% of parents with children under 6 spend their vacations meeting family responsibilities; those with children 6 – 12, 21%; and those with children 13 or older, 17%.

No differences were found by tenure, age, occupational status, earning level, relative emphasis on work and family, elder care responsibility, or combined elder care and child care responsibilities in what employees do while on vacation.

### Longest Vacation and Purpose

There is some debate about how long employees take off at any one time. Some believe that vacation patterns have shifted in this new economy and that employees take less time off now than they did in the recent past. We don't have historical data, so we cannot assess whether that is true or not, but our findings reveal that 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 at least a 7 – 13-day vacation including weekend days; and
- 14% take a vacation of 2 weeks (14 days including weekend days) or more.

Most U.S. employees (72%) use their longest vacations for rest and relaxation with family and friends. However, more than 1 in 7 (15%) use this vacation time to meet family responsibilities. (See Table 15.)

*Very few U.S. employees (14%) take extended time off for their longest vacations (2 weeks or more), while more than 1/3 (37%) take fewer than 7 days in a row including weekends.*

**Table 15: Main Purpose of Longest Vacation**

Why Did You Take Your Longest Vacation? What Was the Main Reason? (n=621)	
To Relax and Enjoy Yourself with Family or Friends or by Yourself	72%
To Meet Family Responsibilities—Such as Illness, Funerals, Care for Sick Children—or Because of Your Own Personal Illness	15
To Do Something Else	13

### Working During 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 and 9 percent work *often* or *very often*. (See Table 16.)

**Table 16: Working on Vacation**

Among Those Taking Vacation in 2004, How Frequently Did They Do Work Related to Job While on Vacation? (n=629)	
Never	58%
Rarely	21
Sometimes	12
Often or Very Often	9

  

Among Employees Who Do Job-Related Work While Vacationing, Why? (n=131)	
Because Their Employer Expects Them to	13%
Because They Want to	36
Some Other Reason	52

*Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.*

It is clear (Table 17) 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.

As noted previously, being more overworked on the job is also associated with working more frequently on vacation. However, causal direction is entirely unclear in explaining this finding.

Interestingly, the number of children at home, the age of the youngest child and marital status are not related to frequency of working on vacation. However, employees with elder care responsibilities are more likely (14% *often* or *very often*) to do work related to their jobs while on vacation than employees without elder care responsibilities (6%), as are employees in the "sandwich generation" (18% versus 7% *often* or *very often*). Since elder care responsibilities are less predictable than child care responsibilities, employees with such responsibilities may find it more necessary to juggle work and family when taking vacation for family reasons.

***Twenty percent of those who contact others or are contacted by others about work matters outside normal work hours on a regular basis also work on their vacations often or very often.***

Table 17: Among Employees Who Have Vacation Benefits, Who Works While on Vacation?

How Often Work During Vacation?	Occupation (n=619)		Sig.
	Manager/Professional	Other Occupation	
Rarely or Never	76%	92%	***
Sometimes	13	6	
Often or Very Often	12	1	

  

How Often Work During Vacation?	Annual Earnings (n=585)			Sig.
	\$20,000 or Less	\$20,001 - \$50,000	More than \$50,000	
Rarely or Never	88%	84%	71%	***
Sometimes	9	9	15	
Often or Very Often	3	7	15	

  

How Often Work During Vacation?	Hours Worked per Week (n=629)				Sig.
	1 - 34 Hours	35 - 40 Hours	41 - 50 Hours	More than 50 Hours	
Rarely or Never	88%	87%	75%	62%	***
Sometimes	13	9	14	12	
Often or Very Often	0	4	11	26	

  

How Often Work During Vacation?	Job Demands (n=628)			Sig.
	Low	Mid	High	
Rarely or Never	87%	87%	71%	***
Sometimes	10	8	15	
Often or Very Often	3	5	15	

  

How Often Work During Vacation?	Relative Emphasis on Work and Family (n=628)			Sig.
	Family-centric	Dual-centric	Work-centric	
Rarely or Never	87%	81%	71%	***
Sometimes	8	11	15	
Often or Very Often	5	8	14	

  

How Often Work During Vacation?	Job-related Contacts Outside Regular Work Hours (n=627)		Sig.
	Less than Once/Week	Once/Week or More	
Rarely or Never	90%	58%	***
Sometimes	6	22	
Often or Very Often	4	20	

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

### How Long Does It Take to Relax 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.

Employees who feel more overworked on the job and those who place greater emphasis on work versus family take the same amount of time to relax as other employees.

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

Vacations have an obvious restorative effect on employees, with most feeling more relaxed and more energized when they return from their longest vacations. However, as shown in Table 18, a significant proportion of the U.S. workforce (43%) return from vacations feeling overwhelmed by everything they have to do. Even among employees who return rejuvenated for their work, some are still overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work that needs to be done.

**Table 18: Feelings upon Returning from Longest Vacation**

Proportion of Employees Who Felt More Relaxed (n=621)	
Very True	46%
Somewhat True	38
Proportion of Employees Who Felt Energized (n=627)	
Very True	33%
Somewhat True	41
Proportion of Employees Who Felt Overwhelmed by Everything They Had to Do When They Returned to Work (n=629)	
Very True	18%
Somewhat True	25

### How Do Vacations Affect Feelings of Being Overworked?

#### Is the Length of the Longest Vacation Related to How Employees Feel upon Returning from Vacation?

As shown in Table 19, vacations of any length—including 3-day vacations that include *long weekends*—tend to have some restorative quality as indicated by the majority of employees feeling more relaxed and energized. Nonetheless, longer vacations of 7 days or more are associated with significantly more positive psychological outcomes than shorter vacations. When asked how long it takes to relax when going on vacation, 21 percent of employees said it takes more than 3 days, and at least for these employees, 3-day weekends are definitely not enough to repair the stresses and strains of work.

Interestingly and surprisingly, the length of longest vacations is not significantly related to employees' feeling overwhelmed by all they have to do upon returning.

**Table 19: Length of Longest Vacation and Feelings upon Returning**

Feelings Upon Returning from Longest Vacation?	Longest Vacation in 2004			Sig.
	1 - 3 Days Including Weekend Days	4 - 6 Days Including Weekend Days	7 Days or More Including Weekend Days	
Felt More Relaxed (n=619) Somewhat or Very True Not Too True/Not at All True	(n=74) 68% 32	(n=147) 78% 22	(n=385) 85% 15	***
Felt More Energized (n=611) Somewhat or Very True Not Too True/Not at All True	(n=73) 60% 40	(n=152) 71% 29	(n=385) 78% 22	**
Felt Overwhelmed by All Have to Do at Work (n=613) Somewhat or Very True Not Too True/Not at All True	(n=74) 43% 57	(n=153) 39% 61	(n=386) 45% 55	ns

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

**Is What Employees Do on Their Longest Vacation Related to How They Feel When They Return?**

Further analyses show that reasons for taking the longest vacation are related to how employees feel when they return. Not unexpectedly, for the 15 percent who take their vacations to address family or personal responsibilities, vacations are less restorative than is the case for those who are able to take vacations to relax and enjoy themselves (Table 20).

**Table 20: Reasons for Longest Vacation and Feelings upon Returning**

Feelings Upon Returning from Longest Vacation?	Main Reason for Longest Vacation in 2004		Sig.
	Relax and Enjoy Themselves	Family Responsibilities or Personal Illness	
Felt More Relaxed Somewhat or Very True Not Too True/Not at All True	(n=442) 89% 11	(n=90) 50% 50	***
Felt More Energized Somewhat or Very True Not Too True/Not at All True	(n=445) 83% 17	(n=90) 39% 61	***
Felt Overwhelmed by All Have to Do at Work Somewhat or Very True Not Too True/Not at All True	(n=446) 40% 61	(n=91) 66% 34	***

[Note: Respondents who gave "other" unclassified reasons were excluded from this analysis so the results would be readily interpretable.]

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

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.

### Who Feels Overwhelmed by Everything They Have to Do When They Return to Work after Their Longest Vacation?

We next wondered which employees are most likely to feel overwhelmed by everything they have to do when they return from their longest vacation. As shown in Table 21, a combination of factors makes a difference:

- Employed parents are more likely than non-parents to feel overwhelmed by all the work they have to do when they return from vacation, although the age of their youngest child doesn't make a difference. Employed parents may be more likely to feel overwhelmed with work than others because they are more likely on average to take time for family reasons, which is significantly related with feeling more overwhelmed for the workforce as a whole (Table 20).

Interestingly, employed mothers are no more likely to feel overwhelmed than employed fathers. Our data don't allow us to fully understand why this is the case, since mothers still tend to take on more family responsibility and generally face more of a challenge managing work and family roles than fathers. On the other hand, fathers are taking on increasing family responsibility and feel just as much conflict between their work and family life as mothers do, according to FWI's 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce. Thus, feelings of being overwhelmed may equally affect both parents.

- Employees with greater responsibilities and more demanding jobs are also 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% feel overwhelmed when they return from their longest vacation, and 50% 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.

Among employees who engage in work related to their jobs *sometimes*, *often* or *very often* while on vacation *and* also say that it is somewhat or very true that they feel overwhelmed upon returning from vacation:

- 69% feel highly overworked on their jobs;
- 78% *often* or *very often* have to work on too many tasks at the same time;

*Although one might hypothesize that employees who work while vacationing are better able to keep up with work demands, this does not appear to be true: 64 percent of them feel overwhelmed when they return from vacation. Apparently the demands of their jobs exceed their abilities to keep up both when they are on the job and working on vacation.*

- 75% are very frequently interrupted on the job making it difficult to get their work done;
- 97% agree that their jobs require them to work very hard; and
- 86% agree that they never seem to have enough time to get everything done on their jobs.

In short, vacations—particularly working vacations—are not a panacea for the strains and stresses of very demanding jobs.

*Vacations—particularly working vacations—are not a panacea for the strains and stresses of very demanding jobs.*

**Table 21: Employee Characteristics and Feeling Overwhelmed Following Longest Vacation**

Feel Overwhelmed by All to Do at Work Following Longest Vacation	Occupation (n=619)			Sig.
	Manager/Professional	Other Occupation		
Somewhat or Very True	43%	46%		ns
Not Too True or Not True at All	57	54		
Feel Overwhelmed by All to Do at Work Following Longest Vacation	Annual Earnings (n=585)			Sig.
	\$20,000 or Less	\$20,001 - \$50,000	More than \$50,000	
Somewhat or Very True	39%	40%	48%	ns
Not Too True or Not True at All	62	60	52	
Feel Overwhelmed by All to Do at Work Following Longest Vacation	Hours Worked per Week (n=628)			Sig.
	1 - 34 Hours	35 - 40 Hours	41 Hours or More	
Somewhat or Very True	31%	39%	<b>48%</b>	**
Not Too True or Not True at All	69	61	52	
Feel Overwhelmed by All to Do at Work Following Longest Vacation	Job Demands (n=628)			Sig.
	Low	Mid	High	
Somewhat or Very True	16%	29%	<b>62%</b>	***
Not Too True or Not True at All	84	71	38	
Feel Overwhelmed by All to Do at Work Following Longest Vacation	Relative Emphasis on Work and Family (n=628)			Sig.
	Family-centric	Dual-centric	Work-centric	
Somewhat or Very True	31%	41%	<b>56%</b>	***
Not Too True or Not True at All	69	59	44	
Feel Overwhelmed by All to Do at Work Following Longest Vacation	Parental Status (n=626)		Sig.	
	No Children under 18 at Home	Children under 18 at Home		
Somewhat or Very True	37%	<b>50%</b>	**	
Not Too True or Not True at All	63	51		
Feel Overwhelmed by All to Do at Work Following Longest Vacation	Frequency of Working while on Vacation (n=628)			Sig.
	Rarely/Never	Sometimes	Often/Very Often	
Somewhat or Very True	39%	50%	<b>64%</b>	***
Not Too True or Not True at All	61	50	36	

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

### Are Employees Who Feel Overwhelmed by Everything They Have to Do When They Return to Work after Their Longest Vacation Less Likely to Feel Relaxed and Energized by Their Vacation?

The answers to both of those questions are affirmative:

- 88% of those who were overwhelmed after returning from their longest vacation also said that it was somewhat or very true that they felt relaxed when they returned, compared with 72% of those who felt overwhelmed upon returning.
- Similarly, 80% who did not feel overwhelmed after returning from their longest vacation felt energized, compared with 67% of those who felt overwhelmed upon returning.

It is very important to note, however, that even the majority of employees who feel overwhelmed when they come back to work after their vacation also feel more energized (67%) and relaxed (72%), again suggesting that vacation time is generally rejuvenating.

### How Do Employees Who Feel Overworked on the Job Respond to Vacation?

Vacations appear to have an immediate impact on even those employees who feel the most overworked. For example, these employees are just as likely as other employees to feel more relaxed when they return to work after their longest vacation. However, they are somewhat less likely (69%) than other employees (75% and 78% for low and mid levels of being overworked, respectively) to feel more energized after their vacations.

However, it appears that the cycle of overwork doesn't take long to kick back in for employees who feel most overworked to begin with:

- Among employees with high overwork levels on the job, 64% say it is somewhat or very true that they felt overwhelmed by the amount of work they had to do upon returning from their longest vacation.
- In striking contrast, only 41% and 21% (respectively) of employees with medium and low overwork levels on the job say they felt overwhelmed by work after returning from vacation.

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

In order to understand just how vacations are related to being overworked, we conducted two levels of analyses. In the first set of analyses, we looked at whether any of the aspects of vacations that we have been investigating (their length, etc.) are associated with being overworked. We then conducted a second set of analyses—regression analyses—to determine whether these associations remained statistically significant once we statistically controlled for demographic factors that are correlated with both vacation benefits and being overworked, such as employees' job responsibilities and job demands.

Most aspects of vacation that appeared to be associated with being overworked in the first set of analyses were no longer statistically significant once these various factors were controlled (Table 22). For example, we had hypothesized that taking a longer vacation might be associated with

*Encouraging employees to take time to simply relax and enjoy themselves may well enhance the restorative impact of vacation time with benefits to both employees and employers.*

feeling less overworked on the job, but once we adjusted for differences in employees' job responsibilities and job demands, we found that it is not.

However, one predictor—taking a higher percentage of vacation days just to relax and enjoy oneself—was associated with feeling *less* overworked on the job in both sets of analyses, even after our control variables were introduced. To what extent employees who are more overworked are less inclined to take vacations just to relax and enjoy themselves and to what extent 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 likely that encouraging employees to take time to simply relax and enjoy themselves would enhance 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 were 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, even when we controlled for differences in employees' job responsibilities and job demands.

To what extent being overworked on the job leads to working during vacation or vice versa, we cannot say.

Even so, 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—placing significantly greater emphasis on work than family—are most likely to fall into the category of feeling more overworked on the job *and* working more on vacation.

Upon further investigation we found that those who feel 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%);
- Much less likely to feel energized (58%) after vacation than other employees (77%); and
- Less likely to feel relaxed (71%) than others (83%) upon returning from vacation.

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, taking vacations may sometimes even have negative consequences.

This finding may lead employers and employees to rethink the practice of forgoing time for rest and recovery and turning vacations into an extension of the workplace.

***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, even when we control for differences in employees' job responsibilities and job demands.***

Table 22: Vacation Benefits and Characteristics Predicting Being Overworked

Level of Being Overworked	Receive Any Paid Vacation Days (n=992)		Cross-tab Sig.	Regression Sig. <sup>1</sup>		
	No	Yes				
High	25%	34%	**	ns		
Medium	33	34				
Low	42	32				
Level of Being Overworked	Amount of Vacation Accruing in 2004 (n=739)				Cross-tab Sig.	Regression Sig. <sup>1</sup>
	1 Workweek or Less	Up to 2 Weeks	Up to 3 Weeks	More than 3 Weeks		
High	22%	30%	39%	36%	**	ns
Medium	43	26	33	36		
Low	35	44	28	28		
Level of Being Overworked	Have/Will All Vacation Days Be Used (n=729)		Cross-tab Sig.	Regression Sig. <sup>1</sup>		
	No	Yes				
High	33%	35%	ns	ns		
Medium	32	35				
Low	35	30				
Level of Being Overworked	Total Vacation Days Already Taken in 2004 (n=759)				Cross-tab Sig.	Regression Sig. <sup>1</sup>
	1 Workweek or Less	Up to 2 Weeks	Up to 3 Weeks	More than 3 Weeks		
High	29%	38%	32%	38%	*	ns
Medium	33	32	40	34		
Low	38	30	28	27		
Level of Being Overworked	Felt More Relaxed After Longest Vacation (n=618)		Cross-tab Sig.	Regression Sig. <sup>1</sup>		
	Somewhat or Very True	Not Too or Not at All True				
High	35%	38%	ns	ns		
Medium	35	36				
Low	30	25				

Table 22 (continued): Vacation Benefits and Characteristics Predicting Being Overworked

Level of Being Overworked	Felt Energized After Longest Vacation (n=618)		Cross-tab Sig.	Regression Sig. <sup>1</sup>
	Somewhat or Very True	Not Too or Not at All True		
High	33%	41%	*	ns
Medium	36	34		
Low	31	25		
Level of Being Overworked	Felt Overwhelmed by All That Had to Be Done at Work Upon Returning from Vacation (n=625)		Cross-tab Sig.	Regression Sig. <sup>1</sup>
	Somewhat or Very True	Not Too or Not at All True		
High	52%	22%	***	***
Medium	34	36		
Low	14	41		
Level of Being Overworked	% of Vacation Days Taken for Simple Relaxation & Enjoyment (n=608)		Cross-tab Sig.	Regression Sig. <sup>1</sup>
	Less than 50%	50% or More		
High	46%	32%	***	**
Medium	34	36		
Low	21	32		
Level of Being Overworked	% of Vacation Days Taken for Family or Personal/Health Reasons (n=608)		Cross-tab Sig.	Regression Sig. <sup>1</sup>
	Less than 50%	50% or More		
High	33%	46%	*	ns
Medium	36	30		
Low	31	24		

ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

1 The "Regression Significance" describes the statistical significance of the relationship between the predictor and being overworked after controlling for indicators of level of job responsibility—occupational status, earnings, tenure, and hours worked per week (less than 35, 35 – 40, more than 40). Employees with greater job responsibilities have significantly more generous vacation benefits, but they are also more likely to feel overworked. An additional control variable is the frequency with which employees do work related to their jobs while on vacation, which is related to both job responsibility and being overworked, but not vacation benefits.

## 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, 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 be 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 are valued, worked toward, and part of the metrics for measuring success.

- **Consider the employee 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 strategies to address issues of overwork 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 they need to be to one another outside normal work hours and set parameters around when it is important to contact each other and when it isn't.
- *Working while on vacations.* 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 vacations 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. Otherwise, we risk depleting human capital and increasing health care costs.

## TECHNICAL INFORMATION

### 2004 Study Methodology

As in 2001, data for this survey were collected by Harris Interactive® on behalf of Families and Work Institute. Harris Interactive was responsible for the telephone data collected and data weighting and Families and Work Institute was responsible for the survey design, data analysis and reporting. For this most recent survey, a nationally representative sample of 1,003 U.S. adults aged 18 and older who are employed full- or part-time by someone else were interviewed by telephone between October 7, 2004 and November 15, 2004.

In order to maintain the reliability and integrity of the sample, telephone field staff adhered to the following procedures when attempting to contact respondents:

1. A non-answering telephone or answering machine was dialed seven more times on different days and at different times of the day. If more than one call was made on the same day—at the request of the household called—these calls did not count as separate attempts. If these attempts failed to yield a completed interview, a new telephone number was called from that sample.
2. Partially completed interviews: If a respondent could not complete the interview during one phone call, up to four additional attempts were made to complete the survey. Data were used only when the entire survey was completed.
3. If a business telephone was reached, or if contact was made with a household in which a potential respondent generated a language barrier, a new telephone number was generated.

A total of 10,673 calls were made to obtain 1,003 qualified completes. The ratio of completed interviews (1,003) to the number of *known* eligible phone numbers (1,034) plus the estimated number of eligible phone numbers among those phone numbers for which eligibility could not be determined (3,279) is 23 percent. This is the *most conservative* estimate of the survey response rate and is comparable to, or a bit higher than, customary response rates calculated in the same manner for other telephone surveys. *It is important to note that once respondent eligibility was determined through several screening questions, 97 percent of interviews were completed. The real challenge for us and other researchers is being able to reach potential respondents by telephone, then engaging them long enough to determine eligibility.*

Sample data were weighted to the U.S. Census Bureau's latest population statistics for education, gender, race or ethnicity, and age. This weighting adjusted these key variables where necessary to their actual proportions in the population. Following sample weighting and on the basis of empirical computation, the values of the design effect (DEFF) and DEFT (square root of DEFF) for this sample design have been determined to be 1.53 and 1.24, respectively.

## Technical Notes

In some analyses the reported sample sizes are smaller than the total sample either because of missing data or because the question was not asked of respondents who did not meet particular conditions—such as having children.

Because of rounding errors, when findings are presented as percentage distributions across several response categories, they do not always add to 100%. Fractional percentages are not reported in order to simplify presentation.

Whenever we talk about *differences* or *relationships*, they are statistically significant unless otherwise noted. The minimum threshold for statistical significance in this report is  $p < .05$ , meaning that a difference reported as significant would only occur 5 times in 100 by chance. Conversely, 95 times out of 100, such a finding reflects a *real* difference. In many instances, the differences or relationships reported here are much less likely to have occurred by chance: 1 in 100 times ( $p < .01$ ) and 1 in 1,000 times ( $p < .001$ ) or less. Levels of statistical significance are indicated in tables using the following conventions: ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; and \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

This survey has a margin of error of +/- 3 percent.

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- 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>).
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- 16 To determine whether these three items reliably described a single phenomenon—"being over-worked"—we tested for internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha was .77. (Alphas range from 0 to 1 where the greater the alpha, the higher the reliability. As a rule of thumb, an alpha greater than .6 is considered reliable.)
- 17 *Generation & gender in the workplace*. (2004). New York, NY: Families and Work Institute.
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