

More work, less time

1 Warmer

a. Tick the sentences that are true for you.

- I work to deadlines.
- I have more work now than I did ten years ago.
- I often feel under pressure to finish my work.
- Customers and clients expect me to answer their emails quickly.
- I feel comfortable with the new technology in my workplace.

b. Discuss your answers with a partner.

2 Key words

a. Write the words from the boxes next to the definitions underneath them.

Use the same word to complete the example sentence immediately after each definition to check your answers and your understanding of the words.

Then read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context.

discretion headcount intensification merger tension think-tank

1. when something becomes greater, stronger, or more extreme _____

The _____ of cattle farming has had negative effects on the environment.

2. a group of people who work together to produce new ideas on a particular subject

After we got the report from the Swedish _____, we decided to make the city centre car-free at the weekends.

3. the feeling of being so nervous or worried that you cannot relax _____

Derek tried to break the _____ with a joke, but, unfortunately, that made things worse.

4. the right to make your own decision _____

Teachers should use their own _____ when choosing reading books for the first class.

5. the process of combining two companies or organizations to form a bigger one

This _____ will create the biggest streaming company in the country.

6. the total number of all employees in a place _____

We increased our _____ last year when we employed eight new trainees.

anxiety

campaign

resonate

spare

trial

warehouse

7. produce an emotional effect on someone _____

That problem is going to _____ with many new parents.

8. a big building where large amounts of goods are stored _____

The old _____ at the port is now an expensive block of flats.

9. available _____

Every _____ bit of land is now used for growing vegetables.

10. a worried feeling you have because you think something bad might happen

There was a feeling of _____ amongst employees when they read about the takeover.

11. a series of actions intended to produce political or social change _____

Local people have started a _____ to stop the hospital from closing.

12. the process of testing a product, plan, or person over a period of time _____

The project will run for a six-month _____ period.

More work, less time

The intensification of work doesn't seem to be making us richer, but it does appear to be making us sicker

SARAH O'CONNOR

- 1 The idea that technology can liberate us from the drudgery of work is a powerful one. It has also been a powerful disappointment, at least so far. Many bemoan the fact that John Maynard Keynes thought we could all be working a 15-hour week by now. But it is not just about working hours. The nature of work also seems to have changed in the past three decades. In spite of – or perhaps because of – new technology, people now say they are working harder to tighter deadlines under greater levels of tension.
- 2 The best evidence for this comes from the UK, where large government-funded surveys conducted every five years show rising “work intensification” since the 1990s. The proportion of employees who “strongly agree” their job requires that they work “very hard” increased from 30 per cent in 1992 to 46 per cent in 2017. The share who say they work to “tight deadlines” for at least three quarters of the time has increased from 53 per cent to 60 per cent. And the share who say they work at “very high speed” for at least three quarters of the time has swelled from 23 per cent to 45 per cent.
- 3 What is striking about this trend is that it's happening to everyone. “It's not just the Amazon production line person who's had their work intensified, it's the London commuter and the new solicitor,” says Francis Green, a professor at UCL who has studied the phenomenon for years. According to an analysis by the Resolution Foundation think-tank, just over two-thirds of employees in the top quarter of the pay ladder said they worked “under a great deal of tension” in 2017. The same was true for half of those in the bottom quarter for pay, but this latter group has experienced the biggest increase in tension since the 1990s. Studies have found work intensification among managers, nurses, aerospace workers, meat processing workers, schoolteachers, IT staff and carers. There is also evidence of work intensification in Europe and the US.
- 4 What's going on? In the 1990s, people said their “own discretion” was the most important factor in how hard they worked. Now they are more likely to cite “clients or customers.” In a world of instant communication, many workers now feel they have to respond quickly to consumer or client demands. That goes for the banker working on a big merger as well as the Uber Eats driver he summons to bring him a burger. In the newspaper industry, we publish important breaking news online as soon as we can. I sometimes think wistfully about our pre-internet predecessors who only had to worry about the print deadline.
- 5 Another possible explanation is that employers have simply cut headcount to save costs without coming up with more efficient ways of doing things. This will no doubt resonate with UK public sector workers who experienced a decade of government spending cuts after the financial crisis.
- 6 Some companies have also harnessed technology to extract more effort from staff. More workplaces like warehouses have become partially automated, which means workers must keep pace with machines. Other workers are now easier to monitor. Witness the growth of software which tracks employees' keystrokes, measures their breaks and sends nudges if they stray on to non-work related sites.
- 7 A fourth possibility is that email and instant messaging platforms like Slack simply tire people out mentally. It is hard to focus when constantly interrupted, which might leave workers feeling as if they are working hard and fast even if they aren't getting much done.
- 8 This raises the key question of productivity. It is not necessarily a bad thing for people to work harder if they had some spare capacity before. After all, higher productivity should lead to better living standards. But work intensification in the UK has coincided with poor productivity growth in the past decade. And while working harder doesn't seem to be making us richer, it does appear to be making us sicker.

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- 9 A new study by academics Tom Hunt and Harry Pickard suggests that “working with high intensity” increases the likelihood of people reporting stress, depression and burnout. They are also more likely to work when sick. Data from the UK Health and Safety Executive shows that the proportion of people suffering from work-related stress, depression or anxiety was rising even before the pandemic hit.
- 10 What can be done? It would be tricky to wind back the various factors that have combined to intensify work. In the absence of simple policy solutions, it is easy to see why the campaign for a four-day week has gained momentum, with a trial beginning in UK workplaces this week. If we can't work less hard, perhaps we should just work less.

FT

Sarah O'Connor June 07 2022

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3 Understanding the article

a. Are these statements True or False according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. Unfortunately, technology has not freed us from having to do boring work.
2. The way we work has not changed much in the past 30 years.
3. More and more employees in the UK say they are working harder and more intensely than before.
4. The amount of work that employees do has only increased for low-paid workers.
5. Clients, customers, and consumers want quick action and responses. This has increased tension and stress for many employees.
6. The automation of workplaces has increased the pressure on employees to work quickly.
7. In the UK, larger workloads and tighter deadlines have resulted in better productivity.
8. Because of work intensification, many employees continue to go to work when they are sick.

4 Business language

a. Rewrite the sentences using the expressions in the box, which are from the article.

gained momentum	in spite of	in the absence of
raise the question of		the pay ladder

1. *Even though she was feeling tired*, she decided to stay late and finish the report.
2. Josephine knew it would take many years to work her way up *to being a top earner*.
3. We need to *ask about* their unpaid invoices.
4. *Because we don't have* the final report, we can't yet say that the first quarter was a success.
5. After the TV report, the campaign quickly *took on more strength and speed*.

b. With a partner, write a new sentence for each of the expressions.

5 Business language

- a. Find words in the article that describe jobs and professions. Make a note of them.
- b. Compare your answers. Then make sentences with the jobs and professions that you would like to learn.

6 Discussion questions

- a. Discuss these questions in pairs.
 - How do you feel when you are working to tight deadlines?
 - What helps you when you have a lot of work?
 - How has new technology and automation in your job changed the way you work?
 - What would happen if you worked less and/or more slowly?
 - Would you like to be able to work a four-day week?

7 Wider business theme – taking a closer look

- a. Choose one of these topics from the article to look at more closely.
 - John Maynard Keynes
 - the UK Health and Safety Executive
 - the UK's public sector
 - the newspaper industry
- b. Prepare and give a five-minute focused presentation on your chosen topic. Do *not* give a general overview of your topic. Instead, focus on one or two interesting parts and look at them in detail. Less is more!