

More work, less time

1 Warmer

a. Complete the sentences in your own words.

1. _____ can liberate us from the drudgery of work.
2. Workers must keep pace with _____.
3. Working with high intensity increases the likelihood of _____
_____.

b. Share your sentences, then scan the article to see what words are used to complete the same sentences there.

2 Key words

a. Write the words from the box next to the definitions below.

Check your answers and your understanding of how the words are used by using the same word to complete the example sentence immediately after each definition.

Then read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context (the words may sometimes be in a slightly different form).

anxiety campaign discretion intensification nudge resonate
share spare stray summon tension think-tank

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

The _____ of livestock farming has had a negative impact on both health and environmental issues.

2. a part of a total number or amount of something _____

Britain's _____ of world trade has been steadily declining over the past two decades.

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

The meetings were facilitated by a non-governmental _____, the outcome of which were then published in all the main trade magazines.

4. the feeling of being so nervous or worried that you cannot relax _____
Derek tried to ease the _____ with a joke, which unfortunately made things even worse.
5. the right or ability to make a judgement or decision _____
Teachers should be allowed to exercise their own _____ in choosing suitable classroom materials.
6. order someone to come to a place _____
I'm worried my boss will _____ me into his office when he hears what happened.
7. produce an emotional effect on someone _____
That one issue is going to _____ more with voters than any other.
8. a small push, hint, or non-verbal message that you give to someone _____
I gave him a _____, and he understood at once that he probably shouldn't say anything else on the matter.
9. move away from a particular subject, usually without meaning to _____
This meeting is beginning to _____ from the agenda.
10. available _____
Every _____ patch of land has been converted into vegetable and flower beds.
11. a worried feeling you have because you think something bad might happen

There was a general feeling of _____ amongst employees as news of the takeover spread around the company.
12. a series of actions intended to produce political or social change _____
Local people have launched a _____ against the hospital's closure.

Why are we all working so hard?

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. The power of technology has freed us from having to do boring work.
2. The way we work has not altered much in the past 30 years as we are still working to roughly the same deadlines.
3. An increasing percentage of employees in the UK say they are working harder and more intensely than before.
4. Work intensification has only increased for low-paid workers.
5. Demands from clients, customers, and consumers for speedy action and responses have increased the level of tension and stress experienced by many employees.
6. The automation of workplaces has at least decreased the pressure on employees to work more efficiently.
7. In the UK, larger workloads and tighter deadlines have not led to a growth in productivity.
8. Work intensification is negatively affecting employees' health, leading to many simply calling in sick and staying at home instead of commuting to work.

4 Business language

a. Find expressions in the article that have the same meaning as, or a very similar meaning to, the words in *italics*. Use those expressions to rewrite the sentences. The paragraph numbers and number of words are given to help you find the expressions.

1. *Even though she was feeling tired*, she decided to stay late and finish the report. (3 words, paragraph 1)
2. Josephine knew it would take many years to work her way up *to being a top earner*. (3 words, paragraph 3)
3. Management is not allowing salaries to *rise at the same rate as* inflation. (3 words, paragraph 6)
4. We need to *ask about* their supply chain and its lack of transparency. (4 words, paragraph 8)
5. *Because we don't have* the final report, we can't yet say that the first quarter was a financial success. (4 words, paragraph 10)
6. After the TV report, the campaign quickly *took on more strength and speed*. (2 words, paragraph 10)

5 Business language

- a. Search the article for words that describe jobs and professions. Make a note of them.
- b. Compare your answers. Then take turns with a partner to describe what people in these jobs do.

6 Discussion questions

- a. Discuss these questions in pairs.
 - Which of these work-related issues have you experienced in the past few months or years and how have they affected your health or motivation?
 - tighter deadlines
 - increased pressure to get work done
 - more tension and stress coming either from within yourself or from your boss/supervisor
 - increased automation
 - electronic monitoring
 - How has the way you work changed with increased technology?
 - What would happen if you worked less and/or more slowly?

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. Instead of giving a general overview of your chosen topic, focus on one or two specific elements and look at them in detail, extracting parts that are likely to be of interest to others.