

# TOO MUCH, TOO LITTLE WHEN WORKLOAD AFFECTS WELLBEING

RACHEL KENNEL, MS



*invista.*<sup>TM</sup>  
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Many aspects of work changed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including employees' workload. In a survey conducted by FlexJobs in partnership with Mental Health America, 37% of participants reported working more hours during the COVID-19 pandemic than they had worked before ([Reynolds, 2020](#)). In many cases, this increased workload may result in work overload, which occurs when an employee handles too many demands, has insufficient time to complete work, or completes tasks for which they may feel unqualified. However, while workload increased in some industries, employees were left searching for tasks in others. These employees may be experiencing work underload, which occurs when an individual has too few tasks assigned to fulfill a role or completes tasks beneath their capabilities.

These two phenomena—work overload and work underload—are not novel workplace issues; however, the pandemic has exposed a need to promote employee wellbeing, and workload is a common workplace stressor and contributor to negative wellbeing among employees.

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## WORK OVERLOAD AND WELLBEING

14%

OF PARTICIPANTS FEEL THEY ARE EXPECTED TO PERFORM TASKS THEY WERE NOT PROPERLY TRAINED TO DO

17%

OF PARTICIPANTS FEEL THEIR WORKLOAD IS GREATER THAN REASONABLE

45%

OF PARTICIPANTS FEEL THEIR ORGANIZATION HAS INSUFFICIENT PERSONNEL TO HANDLE THE WORKLOAD

Data from InVista, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c

Although the word “workload” is often used synonymously with work overload, workload is simply the amount of work required to fulfill job expectations. Of the different types of workload, overload is the most frequently talked about in the workplace. There are two types of work overload: quantitative, which occurs when the workload is too great or the time frame to complete it is too short; and qualitative, which happens when the employee doesn’t have the appropriate skills to do the job ([Quick et al., 1997](#)). For example, many health care professionals have seen a greater number of patients during the COVID-19 pandemic as more and more people become infected. This is quantitative overload: Treating more patients than usual is an increase to the amount of work.

In several recent studies conducted by InVista (2020a, 2020b, 2020c), 17% of employees reported experiencing quantitative overload. This percentage is surprising, as 45% of employees reported their organization didn't have the personnel to handle the workload. Qualitative overload could be seen at the beginning of the outbreak when there was little understanding of the virus. Health care professionals, for example, were not trained to treat a virus they had never encountered and may have felt they did not have the appropriate knowledge and skills to effectively treat patients. However, they possessed skills to treat similar conditions and provided care until more research was released. In the InVista studies (2020a, 2020b, 2020c), 14% of employees strongly endorsed experiencing qualitative overload—they were expected to perform tasks they were not properly trained to do.



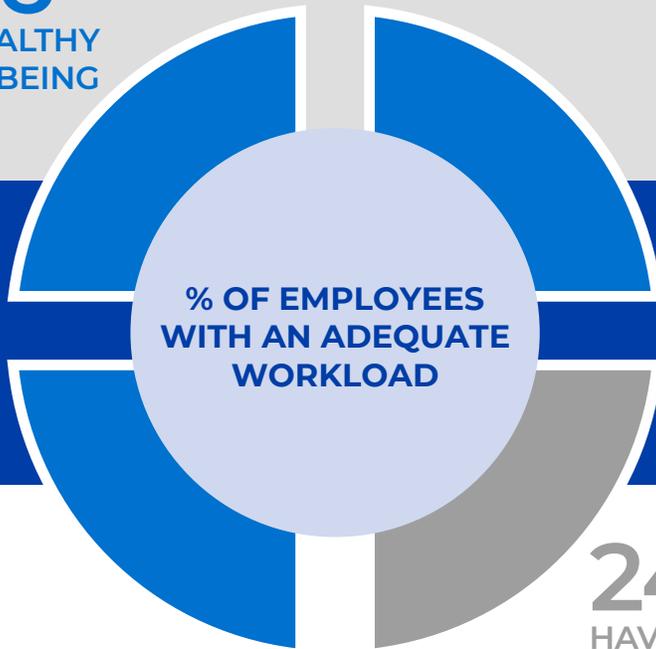
Having too much to do and not enough time to do it takes a toll on an employee's wellbeing.

Work overload's effect on wellbeing ([Bowling et al., 2015](#); [Caplan & Jones, 1975](#); [Spector & Jex, 1998](#)) manifests in:

- ✓ **Frustration**
  - ✓ **Strain**
  - ✓ **Distress**
  - ✓ **Depression**
  - ✓ **Anxiety**
  - ✓ **Fatigue**
- ✓ **Burnout (shown through emotional exhaustion and lack of personal accomplishment)**
  - ✓ **Physical symptoms like increased heart rate and susceptibility to sickness**



**76%**  
HAVE HEALTHY  
WELLBEING



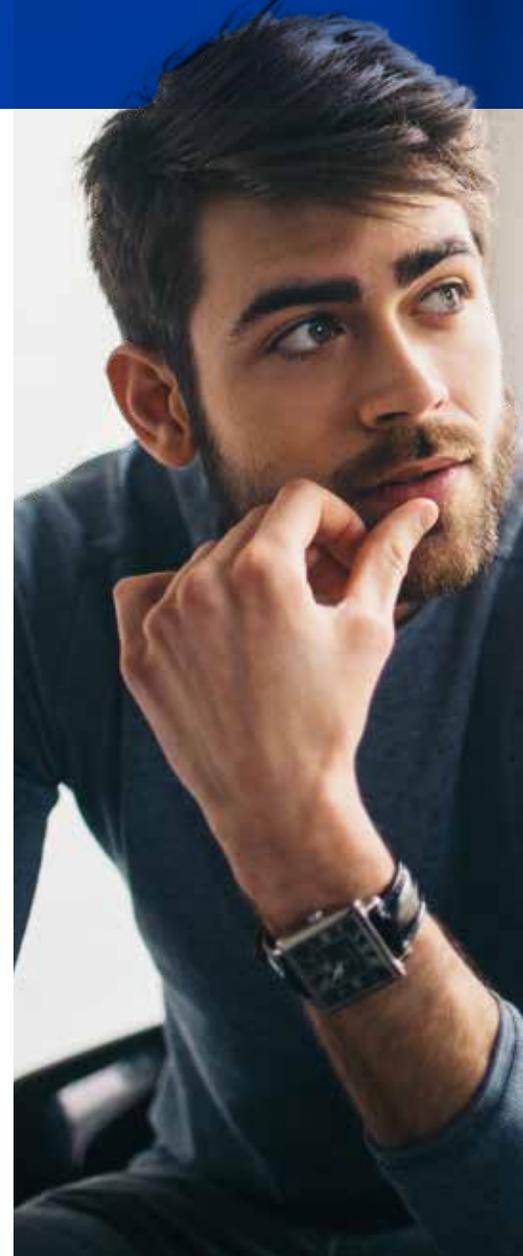
**% OF EMPLOYEES  
WITH AN ADEQUATE  
WORKLOAD**

**24%**  
HAVE POOR  
WELLBEING

Data from InVista, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c

OVERLOADED EMPLOYEES ARE  
**3X MORE LIKELY TO**  
EXPERIENCE POOR WELLBEING

In a study comparing employees who experience overload, underload, and a healthy workload, overloaded employees reported the greatest percentage of negative health symptoms—nearly double compared to the other two groups ([Shultz et al., 2010](#))! Our research tells a similar story. Of employees who expressed experiencing a high workload, only 25% showed signs of healthy overall wellbeing. That means that 75% of overworked employees are not in a current healthy state of wellbeing. The trend is reversed for employees indicating an adequate workload; 76% of these employees were in a healthy state of wellbeing and 24% of them were not (InVista, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).





## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ORGANIZATIONS?

This pattern extends to organizational outcomes. In our research, over 80% of overloaded employees were at risk of burnout (InVista, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). In a survey conducted by Gallup investigating burnout, an unmanageable workload was cited as a top factor (Wigert, 2020). Other factors related to burnout, like lack of manager support and unreasonable time pressure, can influence overload. Managers who are unaware of their employees' workloads may not provide adequate support, and unrealistic deadlines often put pressure on employees' workflow.

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employees were  
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did not express  
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InVista, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c



The good news for employers is that work overload does not lead to burnout and poor wellbeing right away ([de Beer et al., 2016](#)). If an organization experiences a week of high demands and long hours, it is unlikely that employees will suffer long-term effects. However, if demands and persistent stress continue to grow, managers must be vigilant about assigning the appropriate amount of work and control the number of demands before they overwhelm staff.

Turnover risk—the likelihood that employees will leave the organization—may increase with a higher or unmanageable workload. More than 60% of overloaded employees were at risk of turnover, and only 21% of employees who did not express an unreasonable workload were also burned out (InVista, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). These trends suggest that employees who believe there is more work than can be reasonably accomplished are more likely to burn out and leave the organization.

Of course, additional factors have an influence on whether an employee will become burned out or leave the organization. However, armed with the knowledge that more at-risk employees are experiencing overload, managers have opportunities to intervene before these employees leave the organization and to prevent them from experiencing poor wellbeing.

**Managers have opportunities to intervene before at-risk employees leave the organization and to prevent them from experiencing poor wellbeing.**



## TOP WAYS ORGANIZATIONS CAN COMBAT WORK OVERLOAD

### ✓ **Know the load of your staff.**

This is easier said than done. Time tracking and project management tools are one way to quantify workload. Review job descriptions to compare the tasks required in the job to the tasks and responsibilities staff are currently working on. If tasks need to be reassigned, aligning tasks based on role will help make the workload fair ([Knight, 2016](#)).

### ✓ **Hire individuals who are a good fit for the role.**

When someone has the appropriate knowledge and skills, they are unlikely to experience frustrations that come with not knowing how to do their job.

### ✓ **Create policies to prevent understaffing.**

Establish indicators that signal a new hire or position is necessary.

### ✓ **Prioritize (or reprioritize) goals.**

Clearly explain which goals and tasks are critical and which can be put on hold temporarily.

### ✓ **Stop glamourizing overload.**

In some organizational cultures, overload is the norm, making it difficult to eradicate among both managers and employees. Instead, focus on the outcomes rather than the number of hours worked. Leaders in the organization can model the appropriate level of expectations by not replying to emails in off-hours or not commenting on employees' amount of work hours publicly.

### ✓ **Examine leadership style.**

Passive leaders—those who intervene when something goes wrong or take a long time to make decisions—often place a greater workload on their employees because they hold up processes or don't acquire the resources necessary for their team to accomplish goals. [Che et al. \(2017\)](#) found that overload partially explained the relationship between passive leadership and employees' burnout, poor wellbeing, and work-family conflict. More time spent at work means less time spent with family.

### ✓ **Recognize the mental health implications related to overload.**

Workloads affect employees differently. Create a space and foster conversations about workload's impact on employees, and allow others to express concerns.

## BEST STEPS FOR EMPLOYEES SUFFERING FROM OVERLOAD

### ✓ **Voice your needs.**

It's possible your manager may not even know you are managing a heavy workload. When having the conversation with your manager, find common ground (e.g., "You and I both want to provide our customers with the best experience"), share the facts (e.g., "I work about 15 extra hours per week in order to meet deadlines"), and offer solutions (e.g., "Can I ask you to prioritize my projects and see which ones we could pause until next quarter?"). Unfortunately, your manager may not be understanding of your request, which may cause frustration. If that is the case, after you have voiced your concerns and have not received support repeatedly, seek other opportunities that will promote your wellbeing.

### ✓ **If the workload is temporarily overwhelming, identify ways to manage and cope with the stress.**

Though these techniques are often a matter of personal preference, some proven strategies include:

- » Mindfulness
- » Deep breathing exercises
- » Scheduling breaks throughout the day
- » Maintaining an exercise routine

These techniques alleviate the stress, but they do not eliminate the stressor. When employees are overloaded, their energy resources may be emptied, resulting in limited energy to engage in coping strategies ([Hülsheger et al., 2018](#)). In this case, the best solution is to adjust workload to a reasonable level rather than continue to cope with the stress.



**When employees are overloaded, their energy resources may be emptied, resulting in limited energy to engage in coping strategies.**

[Hülsheger et al., 2018](#)



## WORK UNDERLOAD AND WELLBEING

Research and experience have demonstrated that too many demands take a toll on a person's health and wellbeing. But what about having too few demands? [Shultz et al. \(2010\)](#) studied employees who experience overload, those who experience underload, and those who found a good match between their skills and the demands of the job. Although the consequences of workload were greatest among overloaded employees, employees experiencing underload suffered too. Individuals in this group reported significantly greater negative health symptoms—both physical and psychological—than employees who experienced a satisfactory workload ([Shultz et al., 2010](#)). This result is consistent with another study that found absence due to sickness and psychological distress (i.e., somatic complaints, anxiety, irritability, and depression) were related to work underload ([Melamed et al., 1995](#)). From an occupational wellbeing perspective, fewer work demands correlates with decreased job satisfaction ([Keenan & Newton, 1984](#); [Melamed et al., 1995](#)). Qualitative underload—that is, performing tasks typically done by those less qualified—contributes to an employee's frustration at work ([Keenan & Newton, 1984](#)). These effects may be explained by increased stress. Over time, lack of stimulation and meaningful contributions increases stress levels, which leads to unhealthy outcomes. Though the effects of underload may not be as obvious as those of overload in a workplace setting, underload can harm employees physically, psychologically, and professionally.

**Individuals who experienced underload reported significantly greater negative health symptoms than employees who experienced a satisfactory workload.**

[Shultz et al., 2010](#)

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ORGANIZATIONS?

Organizations may be leaving talent and profitability on the table by underutilizing employees. Simply aligning employees' skills with job demands could add hours of previously lost work and increase satisfaction, which is related to decreased turnover ([Lambert et al., 2001](#); [Tett & Meyer, 1993](#)).

## TWO GREAT WAYS ORGANIZATIONS CAN MITIGATE WORK UNDERLOAD

### ✓ Consider redesigning jobs.

Examine roles where employees feel underloaded and assign additional, meaningful tasks.

### ✓ Provide opportunities for growth to employees who are interested in expanding their skills, tasks, or responsibilities.

Ask the employee to identify areas for professional development or recommend them yourself. Employees who have leadership abilities may benefit from the opportunity to mentor and coach others.

The best action for an underloaded employee is to voice their needs. Tell a manager if you can handle greater demands and build the case for why you can accomplish more work. Suggest tasks that fit with your capabilities or that you would enjoy.

While it's challenging to predict and identify each employee's optimal workload, it's crucial for the wellbeing of employees and the organization to find the appropriate level. Too many demands deplete employees' resources, leading to burnout and other health conditions. Employees with too few demands can struggle with poor health and a poor sense of professional accomplishment. It may take a few iterations and different interventions to determine a healthy workload, but the result is a healthy, fulfilled workforce.

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