# DOES YOUR FIRM PROMOTE OVERWORK:
## HOW TO TELL AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

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Working more than 55 hours a week can have serious consequences on employee wellbeing — and it is not surprising. When employees abandon health and life commitments for work, they surrender more than time and energy. Relationships become frayed, mental health falters, and bodies succumb to stress and exhaustion.

While working longer hours may boost short-term productivity, it severely affects employee health and performance over time. Overworked employees suffer from poor sleep and reduced cognitive function; they lack the bandwidth for big-picture thinking. This leads to missed opportunities for creativity, innovation, and client satisfaction. Overwork is also associated with higher health care costs, chronic absenteeism, lower retention, and a reputation for churning and burning employees.

### Does Your Firm Have an Overwork Culture?

Overwork takes hold when firm leaders put productivity ahead of wellness, and fail to set clear work-life boundaries. Decisions about billable hours targets, administrative workload, performance expectations, and cultural norms around availability create an up-or-out culture. There is an implied expectation that employees be available non-stop to complete projects and attend to requests. Overworked employees tend to acquiesce because they fear non-compliance may signal disengagement and expendability.

In this always-on culture, the frenetic energy and stress hormones that come from overwork are normalized. Even when nothing is happening, the possibility that something might happen keeps workers on high alert.

This discomfort makes it psychologically difficult for employees to disconnect from work. Over time chronic stress suppresses the nervous system's ability to restore and recover. This leads to exhaustion, breakdown, and burnout as well elevated risks for cardiovascular disease and stroke.

High performers and caretakers are especially vulnerable. Conscientious and purpose-driven, high performers tend to over-identify with work and ignore early warning signs of burnout, including the erosion of personal relationships. Work can become their primary source of meaning, belonging, and self-esteem. Caretakers may feel they must hide their caregiving duties for fear of bias, leading to increased isolation and mental strain.

### How To Change Overwork Culture

Below are steps leaders can take to imbue balance and achieve sustainable productivity.

**Rethink Priorities and Timelines.** Re-evaluate the impact of firm goals and initiatives on teams. Perform job analyses to determine whether jobs are structured in a way that requires overwork. Even if employees are not required to be always on, overlapping deadlines create pressure to overwork.

**Train Leaders in Sustainable Productivity.** Rather than simply telling employees to stop working late, leaders should lead by example. Look out for covert tactics such as leveraging the emotional commitment of team members to secure extra hours of work. Finally, leaders who penalize or shame caregiving should be coached or removed from people-leadership roles.

**Eliminate Ambiguity and Make Things Transparent.** Employees may continue to push themselves beyond their limits if they feel it is not safe to speak openly about workload. Make it easy for employees to offer differing viewpoints with anonymous surveys, anti-retaliation policies, regular wellness check-ins, and exit interviews.

**Build In Space for Recovery.** Well-rested employees are generally more creative, productive, and resilient. Reset the timing of firm initiatives so surges in workload are followed by periods of rest and recovery. Watch for signs of burnout, such as last-minute completion, errors, and emotional reactivity.

**Change What Gets Admired.** Evaluations, incentives, and norms that reward pace over sustainable productivity send a message. Shift admiration toward colleagues who prioritize health and wellness, set firm boundaries, and work efficiently.