


Chapter 6

Understanding the Psychological Impact of Overwork and Its Effects on Employee Diversity

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ABSTRACT

In today's hyper-competitive professional environments, overwork has become a normalized feature of workplace culture, often praised as a marker of commitment and ambition. Yet beneath this surface lies a complex psychological toll that disproportionately impacts employees from underrepresented and marginalized groups. This chapter explores the intersection of overwork and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), revealing how the constant pressure to do more can quietly erode well-being, motivation, and belonging among diverse employees. Through a multidisciplinary lens—drawing from organizational psychology, sociology, and critical diversity studies—it examines how overwork interacts with systemic inequities, amplifying stress for women, racial and ethnic minorities, caregivers, neurodivergent individuals, and others navigating multiple identity pressures. The chapter challenges prevailing assumptions that performance is best measured by hours worked, offering a counter-narrative rooted in sustainable equity.

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INTRODUCTION

In the relentless rhythm of the modern workplace, overwork has come to symbolize more than just long hours—it has become a cultural badge of honor, a silent measure of loyalty, and a proxy for performance. From high-stakes corporate boardrooms to start-up hubs, the language of hustle dominates: “go the extra mile,” “do whatever it takes,” “burning the midnight oil.” These narratives, though seemingly innocuous, conceal a more troubling reality—the human cost of unceasing labor, particularly for those already navigating systemic inequities within the workforce. While the psychological impact of overwork is broadly acknowledged—ranging from burnout and chronic stress to disengagement and depression—the unique burden it places on diverse employee populations remains insufficiently explored (Maslach & Leiter, 2022). Women, people of color, immigrants, persons with disabilities, caregivers, and neurodivergent workers often find themselves caught in a double bind: expected to prove their worth in environments not built with their needs in mind, while also carrying the invisible labor of navigating bias, microaggressions, and exclusion. Overwork, in such contexts, is not just a professional hazard—it becomes a mechanism that reinforces structural inequality. The discourse around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has gained momentum in recent years, driven by social movements, workforce expectations, and mounting evidence that diverse organizations outperform their less inclusive counterparts (Williams, 2023). Yet, DEI efforts often falter when they fail to address the deeper currents that shape the employee experience—one of which is the unspoken norm of overwork. It is not enough to invite diverse talent to the table if the expectations surrounding work make it unsustainable for them to remain. Overwork disproportionately punishes those with caregiving responsibilities, those from collectivist cultures who may not feel empowered to say no, and those with chronic health conditions or mental health challenges who may not meet the “ideal worker” archetype molded around constant availability and output.

This chapter seeks to examine overwork not simply as a matter of time management or organizational efficiency, but as a structural phenomenon with profound implications for DEI outcomes. By grounding the analysis in psychological theory, labor studies, and real-world case examples, it will illuminate how overwork intersects with identity and systemic bias. The goal is to uncover the subtle but significant ways that overwork undermines efforts to build inclusive, equitable workplaces. In doing so, we raise several critical questions: How do cultural norms around overwork intersect with social identity? In what ways does overwork perpetuate or mask workplace inequalities? Can organizations truly claim to value inclusion if their expectations inherently exclude those who cannot—or will not—overextend themselves to the point of collapse? Most importantly, what can be done to reimag-

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