Extreme work, normal jobs?

How long hours, work intensification, workaholism and occupational identity discourses discourage socially sustainable jobs

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Abstract

Extreme jobs involve long hours and intense effort – and have been characterized as a perfect fit for those high-performing managers and professionals who seek pressure, challenge and stimulation. This review sets both extreme jobs and extreme job-holders in the context of the institutional, occupational and organizational drivers of long hours and work intensification. Rather than advancing discourses of personal choice and person-environment fit, the paper suggests that extreme jobs derive not just from the ‘nature’ of the work (its pace and unpredictability) but also from working practices which have developed to suit ‘ideal workers’ who have no personal or domestic commitments. These working practices interact with both the nature of the work and with occupational identity discourses to encourage not worker choice, but the creation of intense, long-hours jobs. The key consequences of extreme jobs are reductions in human sustainability and gender equality, while at an organizational level, extreme jobs can have negative impacts on worker wellbeing, talent retention, and potentially long-term productivity. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research.

Key words: human sustainability; extreme jobs; long work hours; work intensification; occupational identity

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Introduction

The term ‘extreme job’ has been used to describe the work done by highly-paid professionals and managers who dedicate long hours to their intense, demanding work. Although such jobs are widely recognized and referred to, they are not widely studied in the academic literature. Extreme jobs have sometimes been defined as synonymous with long (60+ per week) working hours (Burke and Fiksenbaum, 2009a; Burke and Fiksenbaum, 2009b). Other studies incorporate elements of work intensification: increasing competition in global markets and the speed and availability provided by technology have put pressure on workers to take on ever larger workloads, work faster, with fewer breaks and at unsociable hours, travel more, and make themselves available to clients 24/7 (McCann et al., 2008; Green, 2008; Hewlett and Luce, 2006; Green, 2004).

Extreme job-holders are often highly involved with their work: some refer to themselves as workaholics or Type A personalities; some enjoy extreme challenge, stimulation, and excitement, which is reflected not just in their work but also in their personal lives, for example in their choice of extreme sports (Hewlett and Luce, 2006). To the extent that the person matches the job and the environment, extreme jobs are sometimes seen as an essentially benign phenomenon, a matter of personal choice. However, others point out the structural, cultural and gender constraints on working hours and working practices (McRae, 2003; McDonald et al., 2006). The stickiness of the belief that long working hours are a personal choice may itself be a product of a liberal, deregulated working time regime (van Woonroy and Wilson, 2006).

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature on the drivers and consequences of extreme jobs, and to suggest areas for further research. A search for ‘extreme jobs’ in the academic databases returned only a handful of papers, so the present study reviews the four overlapping bodies of academic literature which contribute to the phenomenon: a) long working hours, b) work intensification, c) workaholism and d) professional / organizational identification. The first three search terms – long working hours, work intensification and workaholism – were input into two academic databases, ABI and EbsCo, while the extensive literature on organizational and professional identification was limited to sub-sets with each of the other three terms, returning nearly 500 peer-reviewed papers from the past 15 years.
Just under 150 papers were selected for review: only those studies situated in western, developed economies, and managerial and professional sectors, were included, and preference was given to those with a critical or feminist approach. Papers were then excluded on the basis of quality criteria: positioning of the study within existing literature, methodology, credibility of the findings and contribution. The review uses a multi-level analysis – institutional, sectoral, organizational, individual – to highlight the structural constraints within which the individual makes their working-hours and working-practices ‘choices’, and questions the discourses of personal choice and person-environment fit which characterize discussion of extreme jobs.

Drivers of extreme jobs

The attached figure plots the arguments of the paper: analysis of the drivers of extreme jobs and extreme job-holders is followed by a reading of the consequences of extreme jobs, conclusions on creating more socially sustainable work and implications for further research. The figure is not meant to imply a static phenomenon in watertight compartments, but is intended as a visual representation to aid understanding of the key arguments in the paper.

Institutional drivers

Ideal workers and separate-spheres job design

Extreme jobs are a highly gendered phenomenon: Hewlett and Luce (2006) found that 80% of extreme jobs in the USA are held by men. The extreme job-holder shares many characteristics with Acker’s (1990) ‘ideal worker’, who works long hours and prioritizes work above all else. Acker describes ideal worker jobs as inherently designed for two people – a (usually male) paid worker, and a (usually female) unpaid domestic partner who fulfils caring responsibilities, and irons out any variability in domestic commitments, enabling the paid worker to provide a consistent level of service to their organization and maintaining the principle of ‘separate spheres’ of work and home life. The presence of these ideal workers in the workplace has historically defined a ‘normal’ working week for managers and
professionals, as well as setting expectations around organizational structures such as job design and career progression.

**Neo-liberal, deregulated economic and working-time regimes**

In highly unequal societies, working hours are longer (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009), and one explanation is that the desire for more material goods drives the desire to earn more, and therefore to work more. Bowles and Park (2005) show that in developed economies, high levels of income inequality predict longer working hours, and find that the most convincing explanation is the ‘Veblen effect’ (ibid, p. F397) whereby the lower-paid members of society attempt to gain social status by imitating the consumption of the richest. This ‘insidious cycle of work and spend’ (Schor, 1991) has more recently been described as ‘selfish capitalism’, prevalent in neo-liberal societies (such as the UK and USA) which regard the growth of GDP as an unmitigated good, and encourage deregulation, low taxes and privatization, on the basis that individuals are best able to flourish by maximizing their earnings (James, 2008). Such societies have excessive faith in consumption as a means of meeting human needs, drive people to longer hours of work, and over-value paid work and an economic contribution to society, at the expense of family, community, leisure, education and other aspects of life (Schor, 2011; Pfeffer, 2010; Golden, 2009; Jackson, 2009).

Work also, unlike leisure or caring or community activities, provides a status differential (Brett and Stroh, 2003): ‘whereas income serves a positional function, leisure time provides virtually no gain in relative rank’ (Golden, 2009, p.222). This ‘positional effect’ is hypothesized to encourage longer hours and greater identification with work, as individuals choose high-status income over low-status leisure. Schor (quoted in Eastman, 1998, p.53) theorizes that this competitive process of seeking relative rank traps workers in a classic prisoner’s dilemma. Although ‘time affluence’ might be a benefit, achieving it would require cooperation with other workers, while our individualistic society encourages the ‘long hours, high consumption choice’ – material affluence, which confers higher status.

**Technology and global competition**

Competition has increased as a result of globalization, so organizations are under pressure to increase performance and cut costs, often achieved through efficiency drives, restructuring,
flatter hierarchies, reduced job security and downsizing (McCann et al., 2008; Hewlett and Luce, 2006; Green, 2004). The private-sector model of doing more with less has extended into the public sector, which is expected to improve standards of service while lowering costs and increasing efficiency – the discourse of ‘new public management’ (Cooke, 2006). These pressures have led to work intensification and higher workloads, exacerbated by the increased connectivity provided by technology, which intensifies and speeds up the pace of work (Bittman et al., 2009). Working across multiple time zones extends the working day, while technology enables remote working, which extends the workplace into the home and discourages strict boundaries between work and other aspects of life (Perlow, 2012; Ashforth et al., 2000; Feldman, 2002).

**Occupational drivers**

The ‘nature’ of managerial and professional work?

Managerial and professional jobs are traditionally ‘boundless’, defined not by a specific number of hours, but by doing whatever it takes to get the job done (Kalleberg and Epstein, 2001). The widespread belief that the essential ‘nature of the work’ determines long and intense working hours is confirmed in studies of various professions including civil engineering (Watts, 2009), management consulting (Perlow and Porter, 2009; Merilainen et al., 2004; Donnelly, 2006), accounting (Smithson et al., 2004), law (Epstein et al., 1999), the police (Dick and Cassell, 2004) and IT (Meiksins and Whalley, 2002). Particular characteristics of work are identified in the flexible working literature as limiting opportunities for reducing work, including a fast pace with short deadlines, unpredictability, high availability to clients, interdependent tasks and a high need for interaction with colleagues (Perlow and Porter, 2009; Donnelly, 2006; Meiksins and Whalley, 2002; Lee et al., 2002; Kossek and Lee, 2005; Briscoe, 2007). These characteristics mirror many of those in Hewlett and Luce’s (2006) definition of extreme jobs and it seems plausible that they might contribute to the escalation of working hours.

However, the literature on temporal flexibility suggests that long working hours derive not only from the essential characteristics of the work but also from the working practices constructed around those characteristics, and the occupational identity of the job-holders.
Ideal workers, who always prioritize work over personal commitments, don't need to maximize the predictability of their working time, so a project management style which expects crises and constant availability is accepted as part of the 'natural' order of things: maximizing predictability in project management is not a priority (Watts, 2009; Epstein et al., 1999; Perlow, 1999). Client-to-worker specificity (the practice of building personal, rather than team-based client relationships) and individual specialization (rather than overlapping skill sets within teams) have become the norm for the same reason: ideal workers do not need to substitute for each other because they can be constantly available for work (Watts, 2009; Perlow and Porter, 2009; Briscoe, 2007; Perlow, 1999; Perlow, 1998; Perlow, 2001).

Hewlett and Luce (2006) didn’t distinguish between extreme jobs and extreme work, but these studies of temporal flexibility suggest that there is no automatic link between the characteristics of the work and the design of the jobs: a different set of working practices – overlapping skill sets, team-based client relationships, substitutability of one worker for another, and project management designed to maximize predictability – might reduce the need for managers and professionals to work long and unpredictable hours. Indeed, in truly extreme work, where a service has to be provided for 168 hours a week, even relatively senior jobs are designed for substitutability: the unit of analysis (Campion et al., 2005) is the shift, rather than the person. In common usage, the word ‘extreme’ might be more naturally applied to the intrinsic characteristics of the work of fire fighters and trauma surgeons, rather than audit managers and corporate lawyers.

The development of occupational identity

Schneider (1987) suggested that certain personality types are attracted to different occupations, which leads to increased homogeneity and the development of occupational norms. Training practices can intensify occupational identity and membership of the occupational community: in medical training and practice, very long hours and physical ‘encapsulation’ within a hospital cut trainees off from other types of workers and limit ‘the potential identity set, the raw materials that members draw on to make sense of their work’ (Pratt et al., 2006, p.257). Brett and Stroh (2003, p.76) report a ‘self-reinforcing cycle of social contagion’ among American managers in occupations such as financial services.
Bechky (2006) suggests that working practices and occupational identity have a reciprocal relationship, with working practices contributing to the development of occupational identity, and vice versa. Long hours and constant availability to the business and to clients form part of a professional identity (Watts, 2009; Alvesson and Robertson, 2006) and distinguish professionals from other, lower-paid, occupations – as well as justifying ‘extreme’ salaries (Kalleberg and Epstein, 2001; Donnelly, 2006; Seron and Ferris, 1995). Kuhn (2006) identified occupational discourses which encourage greater commitment of time to work: that professional status created an obligation; that the job served a noble community purpose or made a social contribution; and that the ‘nature’ of the work required long hours.

Professionals are assumed to be willing to put their work vocation before everything else in life, at every stage of life, and to avoid or delegate personal commitments which impinge on the separate sphere of work (Fletcher and Bailyn, 2005; Rapoport et al., 2002; Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2004). The working-hours choices available to an individual at a later stage in their career are limited by the perception that, on entering the profession or organization, they also ‘chose’ the long hours (Kuhn, 2006). Thus, individuals in a particular occupation may find that their choices become vanishingly small as they become habituated to particular working hours, working practices and occupational identities, which come to be seen as a fixed part of the ‘nature’ of the work.

**Organizational drivers**

**High-performance work practices and the intensification of work**

Work intensity has been conceptualized as work effort, and defined as ‘the intensity of mental and/or physical exertion during working time’, measured by the quantity and difficulty of the demands of the job, self-reported by employees (Green, 2008, p.116). The strongest explanations of recent increases in work intensity are found in new forms of work organization, including change driven by technology, high-commitment policies, and the decline of collective bargaining (Green, 2004). Other high-performance work practices include empowerment, mentoring, consultation and in-company communication, team-based work, training and development, and high salaries, all of which might increase employees’ commitment, involvement and identification with organizational objectives (Green, 2004).
Organizational identification

Organizations may encourage worker effort not through traditional bureaucratic mechanisms but through encouraging identification with organizational values. Alvesson & Willmott (2002) refer to this type of identity regulation as ‘producing the appropriate individual’ and suggest that organizational identification limits the options available to workers. Alvesson and Robertson (2006) have identified the discourse of belonging to an elite as a means of encouraging employees ‘willingly’ to offer high commitment and long hours: this discourse involves concepts such as exclusiveness, technocratic excellence, a high degree of attachment, a feeling of being ‘special’, being highly respected, or having access to resources – as well as high financial rewards.

Competition for promotion and rewards

Increased competition for promotion because of organizational delayering has combined with the growth of very high salaries to encourage long hours: ‘because a slight performance edge yields outsize rewards (culminating in the gargantuan salaries awarded to CEOs these days), there is a powerful incentive to work incrementally more than one’s rivals’ (Hewlett and Luce, 2006, p.4). Competition for promotion has also increased with women’s encroachment on the traditionally male territory of senior jobs in professional and managerial sectors: ‘competitive presenteeism’ is one metric on which men can compete on unequal terms with women who have caring responsibilities (Simpson, 1998). Van Echtelt et al (2006) show how post-Fordist working practices such as a lack of externally-imposed boundaries, the need to build a personal reputation and competitive dismissal procedures encourage long hours in the race for promotion. Technology has shifted the burden of determining when to start and stop work from the employer to the employee (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner et al., 2006). Organizational performance appraisal, development opportunities, salary and promotion decisions may rely on working hours as a proxy for measuring such intangible (but supposedly objectively defined) concepts as organizational commitment or leadership potential (Epstein et al., 1999; Perlow, 1998).
Drivers of extreme job-holders

Discourses of personal choice and fit

Participants in Hewlett and Luce’s (2006) study characterized extreme jobs as an essentially benign phenomenon, a matter of personal choice, and of person-environment fit. Structural, cultural and gender constraints on working hours and working practices, while observed by Hewlett and Luce and by other studies (McRae, 2003; McDonald et al., 2006; Rubery et al., 1998; Fagan, 2001), are not recognized by extreme workers themselves. It has been suggested that the stickiness of the belief that long working hours are a personal choice may itself be a product of a liberal, deregulated working time regime such as is found in the USA, UK and Australia (van Woonroy and Wilson, 2006).

Work and identity construction

The process of identity construction provides one way of understanding the constraints on personal choice: personal identity is constrained by available discourses (Pratt et al., 2006; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), but this need not imply minimizing the importance of social structures, or returning the entire responsibility for working hours to personal ‘choice’.

Work is a central means of defining identity in western societies – more than class, community, family or gender (James, 2008; Wharton and Blair-Loy, 2002). Work may provide meaning and purpose to life, social standing, self-respect, personal growth and fulfilment, challenge, and the stimulation of working on exciting projects with interesting colleagues (Hewlett and Luce, 2006; Golden, 2009; Lewis, 2003; Isles, 2004). Working longer hours might logically provide more of the same, as Brett & Stroh (2003) found among male American MBA graduates. However, managers and professionals do not find it easy to separate the non-work self from the professional or organizational self and have to ‘combat both the company’s demands and one’s own impulses, not easily distinguishable, to allocate more time to work and to the organizational self that is formed in its context’ (Kunda, 1992, p.167).
Kuhn (2006) shows that workplace time commitments result from the complex interaction of organizational and geographical discourses with the individual’s attempts to construct a coherent identity. Differing societal, cultural and gender discourses are demonstrated in a cross-national study of management consultants (Merilainen et al., 2004): UK consultants worked within a framework of competitive masculinity, work addiction and long hours, while in Finland, the discourse of work-life balance, at least when parenting young children, was normalized for both men and women, enabling a reduction in working time without the loss of professional or organizational identity.

Non-work and identity construction

The process of identity construction happens in a context which may either conflict with, or validate, the story being told about one’s self (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010a; Ibarra, 1999). In an extreme-jobs organization or occupational group, working fewer hours is inconsistent with dominant career, professional or organizational membership identities and may represent a threat to personal identity which will trigger identity work (Alvesson et al., 2008; Ashforth et al., 2008), forcing the individual to seek alternative narrative material (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010b). The most obvious alternative material is available to mothers, for whom an all-encompassing identity discourse is readily available, albeit one that frequently conflicts with occupational identity discourses (Blair-Loy, 2003; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). Non-mothers may find it harder to see an atypical work status as coherent with both their role as professionals, and with other roles in life, particularly breadwinning (Warren, 2007). The societal discourse of work-life balance has been overly focused on mothers, to the exclusion of other groups in society, such as fathers, and child-free men and women, whose work-life balance needs remain under-researched (Ozbilgin et al., 2011).

Workaholism, work passion and situational motivation

Participants in Hewlett and Luce’s (2006) study of extreme jobs use the terms ‘workaholic’ and ‘Type A personality’, suggesting both a stable personality characteristic and a suitability for extreme jobs. Their discourse is one of hardiness (Kobasa et al., 1982; Benishek and Lopez, 1997; Eschleman et al., 2010) and resilience under pressure, but the term workaholic has several meanings. Early definitions of workaholism combined elements of work
involvement, work enjoyment and intrinsic drive (Spence and Robbins, 1992; Burke, 2000) but didn’t include a behavioural element (so a workaholic might only work 30 hours a week) and confusingly, didn’t address the element of addiction implied by the suffix -aholic (Schaufeli et al., 2009).

The more recent concept of heavy work investment starts with the long-hours behaviour, and distinguishes between two types of motivation: situational, which is imposed by external and uncontrollable factors (financial drivers, demanding work culture or boss), and dispositional, which stems from personal characteristics (Snir and Harpaz, 2009). Dispositional heavy work investors are sub-divided depending on how they internalize their interest in a work activity into their identity. If the internalization is autonomous (undertaken willingly and without contingencies), the result is a work passion, which confers a sense of volition and psychological freedom; for example, an individual might work long hours because they see the tasks as valuable, or because they are immersed in the ‘flow’ of a particular task. However, a workaholic feels compelled by a negative internal pressure, such as bolstering self-esteem, or the avoidance of guilt, shame or anxiety: this is a work addiction.

This characterization informs the debate about ‘choice’ in extreme jobs: addiction (-aholic) means losing control over the addictive substance (work) and therefore the loss of choice. Extreme jobs are not a benign phenomenon for everyone, but this is not just a case of ‘hardy’, Type A or resilient workers (Eschleman et al., 2010) finding their way into extreme jobs, while the less resilient or less well-suited fall by the wayside: it is suggested that a proportion of extreme job-holders are driven, perhaps unhappily, by external factors such as outsize rewards, while a further proportion are actually addicts – a pathology, not a lifestyle choice. The nature of the work is therefore not always a perfect match for the nature of the people who do the work.

**Consequences of extreme jobs**

**Consequences for individuals and society**

Gender equality
The ‘ideal worker’ is at odds with the life experiences of most women, who retain the majority of domestic and caring responsibilities (Pocock, 2005; Crompton et al., 2005). Extreme jobs make it less likely that those with caring responsibilities will be able to stay in the workplace: a 60-hour week makes a domestic life much harder than a 40-hour week, and carers (mostly women) have further to travel in their transitions between different identities than in a ‘normal’ full-time environment (Ashforth et al., 2000; Fletcher and Bailyn, 2005).

The impossibility of meeting the ‘competing devotions’ of both extreme worker and devoted mother pushes women out of work (Blair-Loy, 2003; Stone, 2007) – particularly if they are married to husbands who work long hours. When their husbands work more than 60 hours per week, the probability of giving up work is significantly increased for mothers in professional roles – although a man’s odds of leaving work are not significantly affected by his wife’s working hours (Cha, 2010).

A further consequence of women leaving the workplace is an increase in the numbers of male ideal workers, as more men acquire the domestic partner they need in order to perform as an ideal worker, working long hours, and dedicating themselves to work without domestic interference (Merilainen et al., 2004; Stone, 2007).

For those mothers who stay in an ‘extreme’ sector or workplace, part-time work may mean 40 or 50 hours per week – and such part-timers still suffer by comparison with professional norms. The UK construction industry was found to be ‘dominated by the values of presenteeism and infinite availability’ (Watts, 2009, p.37) to such an extent that female engineers who wanted to work fewer hours risked their professional credibility. Tsouroufli, Ozbilgin and Smith (2011) find a similar situation in medicine: part-time doctors are marginalized, and women who want to be ‘taken seriously’ have to adopt masculine time norms.

**Human sustainability**

It has been suggested that organizations need to be aware of their impact not just on the physical environment, but on the social environment. Pfeffer (2010, p.35) describes human sustainability as ‘how organizational activities affect people’s physical and mental health and wellbeing – the stress of work practices on the human system – as well as effects of
management practices such as work hours and behaviors that produce workplace stress on groups and group cohesion, and also the richness of social life, as exemplified by participation in civic, voluntary, and community organizations.

Extreme jobs reflect a worldview in which paid work, and an economic contribution to society, take precedence over contributions to other spheres of life – family and community work, education, leisure, the pursuit of wellbeing, and active citizenship. Long working hours are consistent with the ideology of economic growth as the key to meeting human needs (James, 2008; Layard, 2005), the discourse of personal choice and disregard for structural constraints on working hours (van Woonroy and Wilson, 2006; Rubery et al., 1998; Fagan, 2001), and the construction of capitalism as ‘for shareholders’ rather than ‘for stakeholders’ (Pfeffer, 2010). At the same time, there is strong evidence that long working hours reduce health, wellbeing and job satisfaction (Sparks et al., 1997; Sparks et al., 2001; Dewe and Kompier, 2008; Ng and Feldman, 2008) and increase work-life or work-family conflict (Burke and Fiksenbaum, 2009c; Lyonette et al., 2007; Major et al., 2002) while non-work activities, particularly family, social and community relationships, have been shown to be essential for human happiness and flourishing (James, 2008; Layard, 2005). People need non-work time for this flourishing, but ‘time poverty’ is prevalent in western society, particularly among dual-career couples with children and single working parents (Harvey and Mukhopadhyay, 2007; Warren, 2003). Kasser and Sheldon (2009) suggest the concept of ‘time affluence’ as an alternative measure to material affluence, and show correlations between time affluence and employee wellbeing.

Jackson (2009) suggests that, in order to achieve both human and environmental sustainability, an alternative definition of prosperity is needed – a definition that values, and counts, something other than economic growth. This account might include not just the environmental impact of economic activity, but also its social impact, and especially the impact of long hours of paid work on family and community work. A fundamental redistribution of the way we spend our time would be needed to achieve these definitions of human flourishing, social sustainability or time affluence. Schor (2011) and Jackson (2009) develop the economic case for both a reduction of hours of work, and a redistribution of work, right across the working population. Schor suggests that long working hours raise the bar for creating new jobs: for example, in Germany, where the working day is 20% shorter than in the USA, employers need to earn less revenue in order to create each new job. The productivity growth which has characterized the development of capitalism over the past few
hundred years has historically been channelled into a growth in profits: Schor proposes that instead, it could be used to finance reductions in working hours.

Although economists have traditionally dismissed the ‘lump of labour’ assumption (that there is a fixed amount of work to be done, and that long hours workers are therefore contributing to unemployment, or under-employment, for others), Golden (2000) suggests that working-time reductions could reduce unemployment if they were combined with tax, social security, and industrial relations incentives to redistribute work. Current employment structures support the current distribution of hours across the population at both state and employer level: employers incur immediate and tangible per-person costs when they employ more people – costs such as recruitment and training, benefits, and organizational overhead (Dembe, 2009). The benefits to the employer of redistributing work so that they employ more people on shorter hours – retaining talent, reducing stress, improving employee wellbeing – are long-term, hard to measure, and somewhat ‘soft’ or intangible. However, the benefits to society as a whole may include increased wellbeing, greater gender equality, happier children, lower health and social security costs and more active citizenship (Schor, 2011; Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012; Coote et al., 2010; Dembe, 2009).

Those who work very long hours dedicate their skills, energy and experience to their work, their career, and to the economy – but if this is at the expense of their personal life, community or family, working hours are not just a personal choice, but an ethical question for the whole of society (Dembe, 2009). A recognition that all workers have non-work interests, demands and responsibilities might provide an alternative to the ideal worker as the central structure of managerial and professional work, enabling men, and child-free women, to develop and articulate socially significant non-work identities (Ozbilgin et al., 2011; Casper et al., 2007) such as fathering (where Scandinavia has led the way, Dermott, 2006; Kvande, 2009), caring, social and community roles and active citizenship. The fundamental assumption for socially sustainable jobs is not that work is the structuring principle of life and always comes before personal commitments, but that all workers need to match their work commitments to their varying personal commitments and work orientations throughout the life course.
Consequences for organizations

Loss of talent

Organizations and professions invest heavily in training female professionals, but then retain a system of job design and career development which makes it hard to combine this with caring responsibilities (Stone, 2007), while conceptualizing women’s exit from the workplace as a personal choice in favour of motherhood. Organizations thus lose female talent, and there is a measurable cost to the national economy in the loss of skills and experience to the workforce (Connolly and Gregory, 2008).

Productivity

The impact of shorter working hours on worker health and wellbeing is mentioned above, but can any link be made between working hours and productivity or financial performance? Here the evidence is harder to collect and measure, and less conclusive. Ng and Feldman (2008) point out impaired judgement and increases in unforced errors when people work long hours, but Warr (1990 in Green, 2008) has also proposed that while burn-out might occur over the long term, long hours might boost productivity in the short term. The impact of working hours on performance is harder to assess because it may also be at one remove: for example, lower creativity is associated with some types of stress (Byron et al., 2010), and stress is associated with long hours and work intensity (Feldman, 2002; Burke et al., 2010). The effects of long working hours on productivity or quality of work might also depend on person-environment fit at different life stages, rather than on stable personality type.

Hardy, resilient (even heroic) professionals and managers may be expected to cope with long hours and constant availability, but in a truly extreme environment, where a 24/7 service has to be provided (e.g. health care, emergency services, air traffic control), there is a common-sense understanding that no individual can maintain a high level of performance for the entire 168 hours in every week, so limits are enforced, along with procedures to minimize risk. The idea of enforcing time off improved communication in Perlow and Porter’s (2009) action research in a management consultancy where 24/7 availability to clients had previously been regarded as essential. Rapoport et al. (2002) also conducted action research in which an
explicit work-life balance agenda was found to improve work group processes such as planning, information flow and project scheduling.

Ineffective work-life balance programmes

Organizations with a culture of extreme jobs may simultaneously offer work-life balance programmes, in the belief that individuals in these contexts are able to freely choose their working hours to suit their lifestyle. How effective can such programmes be in an extreme-jobs culture – and how real is the choice of working hours for managers and professionals? Deep, taken-for-granted structures such as working practices, job designs, and expectations of career progression encourage long hours and work intensification, while work-life balance, talent retention, gender equality and diversity initiatives are ineffectively ‘bolted on’ – and marginalized (Ford and Collinson, 2011; Kossek et al., 2010). The prevalence of the ideal worker with no domestic commitments, and the principle of separate spheres of work and home (Acker, 1990) shut personal and domestic concerns out of the workplace: work-life balance can only become a reality if organizations view employees as ‘whole people with legitimate lives beyond work’ (Kossek et al., 2010, p.10) and recognize that in reality, ‘life’ goes on at work and ‘work’ goes on at home’ (Ford and Collinson, 2011, p.269). Moreover, people’s work-life balance needs are not static or permanent: shifts in work orientation occur for both men and women (Ford and Collinson, 2011; Warhurst et al., 2008).

Conclusion

The key contribution of this paper concerns the consequences of extreme jobs not just for gender equality but also for human sustainability. Paying greater attention to the institutional context, and the ideology of capitalism as currently constructed in western developed economies, might not only help explain the rise of extreme jobs, but also articulate a discourse of change. Extreme jobs, and the ideology they reflect, are not morally neutral, but have implications for human sustainability – for family, community and social relationships, active citizenship and the pursuit of wellbeing, all of which are essential for human flourishing. Working practices, job designs and working hours designed for male breadwinners who could work the same number of hours throughout their lives (because they
had wives to take care of fluctuating domestic responsibilities) are no longer fit for purpose, given the 21st-century expectation that every adult should be economically active.

A second contribution is to suggest a distinction between the essential characteristics of some types of extreme work (pace, unpredictability, 24/7 availability) and the social construction of extreme jobs: the former need not automatically lead to the latter. Instead, a series of working practices (client-to-worker specificity, individual specialization, project management which fails to maximise predictability) tend towards extending working hours: adapting these working practices might mitigate the need for extreme jobs, even in fast-paced, unpredictable and always-on environments.

A third contribution is to separate extreme jobs from extreme job-holders. The psychological literature on workaholism and work passion demonstrates that not all extreme job-holders are necessarily healthily engaged with their work. Extreme jobs are a different phenomenon from happily-engaged extreme job-holders, and while there are no doubt many examples of a perfect fit, we cannot assume that this is universal.

Further research

Pfeffer (2010) argues that the impact of organizations on the social environment has been under-researched. Although wellbeing and happiness are increasingly studied in both psychology and economics, the management literature has only addressed their impact on profits, costs or productivity. It has also been argued that economic models which focus on growth in GDP do not tend to create socially sustainable work (Jackson, 2009; Schor, 2011). Further research is needed on the impact of extreme jobs on human sustainability, and specifically on health and wellbeing, family and community involvement, active citizenship and gender equality.

If working practices do not derive solely from the ‘nature of the work’, which working practices support part-time and ‘normal’ full-time as well as extreme jobs? Research to date has highlighted that client-to-worker specificity, individual specialization, and project management which fails to maximize predictability, tend to encourage long hours, but what other working practices are implicated and how do they vary in different occupations?
Bechky (2006, p.1761) suggests that the reciprocal relationship between working practices and occupational identity needs further research, so that we can better understand ‘how occupational communities are rooted in work practices, and how such practices contribute to the development of occupational identity’. How are new entrants to the workforce socialized into extreme working practices in different occupational sectors, and what role does gender play?

Social identity provides one means of understanding what drives extreme job-holders, focusing on the salience of different group identities (social, occupational, organizational), the processes of identity construction, and the discourses available to individuals in different environments and working time regimes. How do extreme job-holders construct their work and non-work identities? Research on this topic has focused on the conflict between occupational identity and women’s (particularly mothers’) identities (Watts, 2009; Blair-Loy, 2003; Tsouroufli et al., 2011) but how do single and child-free extreme job-holders negotiate occupational identity with other non-work identities? And conversely, how can they develop a socially-significant ‘excuse’ for working less?

Empirical study of how an interest in a work activity is incorporated into one's identity is needed, in order to distinguish passionate extreme job-holders from workaholics and from those driven by situational motivation. What is the significance of these different motivations for worker wellbeing and productivity? Vallerand & Houlfort (2003) suggest that distinguishing between these two types of dispositional motivation is the key to positive outcomes, both at work and in leisure time: they propose that a work passion should not conflict with other life activities. Is there a difference in the societal contribution made by passionate workers and workaholics? These questions need to be answered with sensitivity to both short-term and long-term experience of extreme work, person-environment fit at different life stages, and personality factors such as Type A or hardiness.

Finally, how feasible is any change in working practices, if short-term profit results from adopting the high-commitment work practices and organizational identification which result in work intensification and long working hours? Organizations already have to balance these short-term interests against the longer term negative consequences of extreme jobs for the health and productivity of their workforce, and the retention of talent: how might they integrate a measure of the impact of extreme jobs on social sustainability?


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Figure 1: Extreme work, normal jobs? How long hours, work intensification, workaholism and occupational identity discourses discourage socially sustainable jobs

Drivers of extreme jobs

Institutional:
- Jobs designed for ideal workers
- Deregulated economic and working-time regimes
- Technology and globalization

Occupational:
- Perceptions of the ‘nature’ of managerial and professional work
- The development of occupational identity

Organizational:
- High performance work practices which encourage intensification of work
- Organizational attempts to encourage identification
- Competition for rewards in a post-Fordist culture

Drivers of extreme job holders

Prevalent discourses in western developed economies:
- Personal choice and fit
- Work as a central element of identity construction
- Absence of socially significant non-work identities (except for mothers)

Workaholism, work passion, and situational motivation

Consequences for individuals and society

Gender inequality

Reduction in human sustainability:
- Lower health and wellbeing
- Less work-life balance
- Lower family and community involvement
- Less active citizenship

Consequences for organizations

Loss of talent, especially female talent

Lower worker health and wellbeing; potential for lower long-term productivity

Ineffective work-life programmes

Creating socially sustainable work

- Setting discourses of choice within structural constraints, including articulating those discourses of capitalism which encourage extreme jobs rather than human sustainability
- Separating extreme work from extreme jobs: developing working practices to maximise human sustainability, even in extreme environments
- Recognizing that extreme job-holders are not always a perfect fit for extreme jobs: there are many motivations for extreme job-holders

Research implications

- What is the impact of extreme jobs on measures of human sustainability – and how might organizations be encouraged to measure it?
- Which alternative work practices support part-time and ‘normal’ full-time working, even in fast and unpredictable environments, and how do they interact with occupational identity discourses and perceptions of the ‘nature’ of professional work?
- How do extreme job-holders construct their work and non-work identities – and how do they incorporate an interest in a work activity into their identity?
- What is the impact of workaholism, work passion and situational motivation on extreme job-holders’ wellbeing, productivity, and societal contribution?