

Time pressure and other challenges – Is work getting more intensive and stressful?

26 baua: Facts

The world of work has become more complex and is in a constant state of change. Does this mean that work for employees is becoming more intensive and stressful? This is a question currently asked about the situation of the working population. To provide initial answers, data from the BIBB/BAuA employment surveys 2006, 2012 and 2018 were analysed for this fact sheet. Each survey involved more than 17,000 dependent employees. The results show that the intensity of their work has remained at a relatively constant high level over time and has only partially decreased. In addition, more and more employees experience high-intensity work as a burden.

What does labour intensity mean?

To determine the degree of labour intensity, the BIBB/BAuA employment surveys measured the following working conditions:

- keeping an eye on different tasks or processes at the same time
- working under strong pressure to meet deadlines or pressure to perform
- being interrupted or disturbed at work, e.g. by colleagues, poor material, machine malfunctions or telephone calls
- having to work very quickly
- working at the limits of capabilities

How many employees are affected?

Employees were first asked whether the working condition in question occurs frequently, sometimes, rarely or never. In 2018, more than half of respondents reported that they frequently had to keep an eye on different tasks or processes at the same time (60 %). Fewer respondents said that they frequently work under strong pressure to meet deadlines or performance pressure (48 %), are disturbed or interrupted at work (46 %) or have to work very quickly (34 %). Significantly fewer respondents stated that they frequently work at the limits of their capabilities (16 %). The comparative analysis over time shows that the incidence of individual working conditions has remained almost constant. Exceptions to this are strong pressure to meet deadlines or pressure to perform and working very quickly, where a decline of up to 11 percentage points can be observed. Figure 1 shows the results for 2018 compared with the previous surveys of 2012 and 2006.

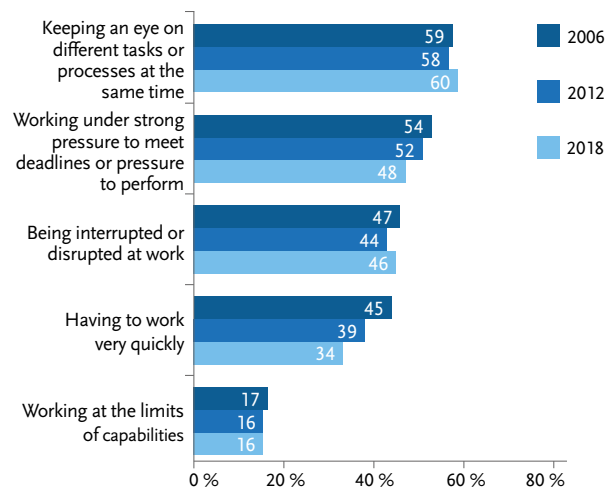


Fig. 1 Proportion of dependent employees frequently exposed to these working conditions (in %)

The extent to which working conditions are experienced as a burden varies. In 2018, for example, around one-third of those affected found it stressful to manage multiple tasks or processes at the same time (33 %). On the other hand, more than three-quarters experienced frequently working at the limit of their capabilities as stressful (79 %). The comparative analysis also shows that employees feel increasingly stressed by their working conditions over the years. In 2006, for example, 43 % of employees reported that they felt stressed by working very quickly; in 2018, that number had risen to 51 %. The only exception is interruptions and disturbances at work. Here, the perceived stress remains at the same level as in previous years.

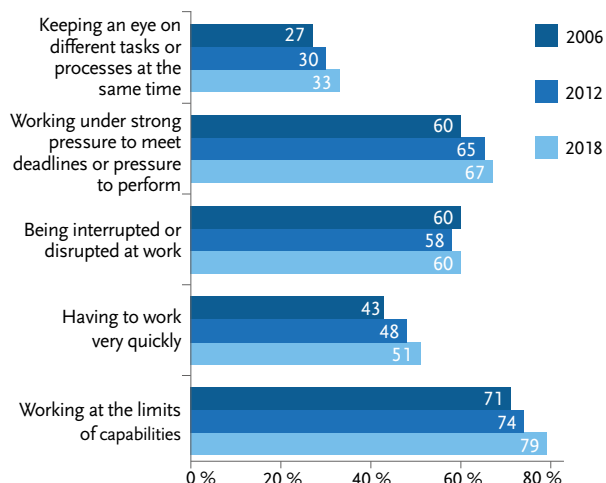


Fig. 2 Answers to the question "If you are frequently exposed to these working conditions, does it burden you?" (in %)

The more the worse?

Each working condition carries with it a certain potential for stress. The working world, however, consists of complex interactions of many working conditions. As a result, stress levels can be shown to be particularly high when several of these conditions occur simultaneously. For 2018, Figure 3 shows that the more working conditions employees were exposed to, the more physically and emotionally exhausted they were. This form of exhaustion is a key indicator of burnout.

In the group of workers who did not experience any of the five conditions frequently, only 7 % reported to be exhausted. In the group frequently exposed to all five conditions, almost half of the employees reported exhaustion (49 %). Although labour intensity is not the only reason for exhaustion, it is nevertheless a contributory factor.

What must be done to reduce stress potential?

High work intensity did not occur more frequently in 2018 than it did six or twelve years ago. However, in today's more complex working world, employees increasingly experience high work intensity as stress. In addition, high work intensity goes hand in hand with employee exhaustion and may represent a health risk.

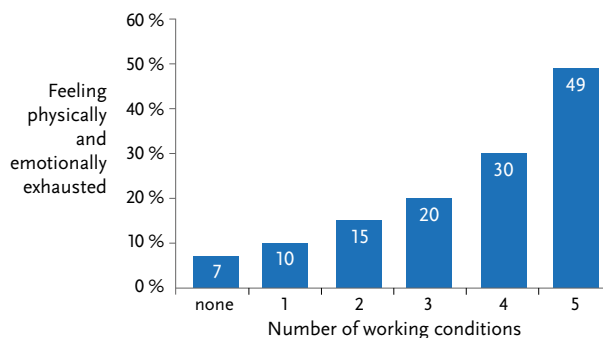


Fig. 3 Proportion of employees who feel exhausted, by number of working conditions (in %)

Therefore, it is important to actively reduce potential stress. For example, managers should give their employees adequate autonomy over how to complete their tasks in terms of speed, content and sequence. This can buffer the negative effects of high work intensity. Furthermore, managers should create a supportive work environment characterised by an appropriate level of demands, feedback and social support.

A high intensity of work cannot always be avoided, especially given the rising complexity of work. Therefore, it is important to create a conscious balance, to take breaks and to spend those breaks in a way that is beneficial to one's health.

Further Information

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- 2 J. Wendsche, A. Lohmann-Haislah, 2018: Arbeitspausen gesundheits- und leistungsförderlich gestalten. In: R. v. Dick, J. Felfe, S. Ohly, J. Wegge, Hrsg. Managementpsychologie: Band 3. 1. Auflage. Göttingen: Hogrefe Verlag