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Pressure, Performance and Prestige: Dilemmas for Contemporary Professionals

Ana Heloisa Costa Lemos*
Leila Sharon Nasajon Gottlieb**
Alessandra de Sá Mello da Costa***

Abstract

Recent changes in the world of work have resulted in a greater level of work intensification. Whilst there have been gains in productivity, workers have been subject to increasing demands of both a physical and mental nature, which tend to have a negative impact on their well-being. Our interest in understanding this phenomenon has led to a qualitative study that seeks to analyse the experiences of professional graduates working in organizations that use high-performance practices, which tend to generate work intensification. The respondents revealed both the negative implications of work intensification, such as an increase in the working day, excessive pressure and sacrifices in their personal lives, as well as other aspects considered positive, such as learning, professional growth, autonomy and financial gains. These latter aspects deserve attention, since they can help us understand what leads qualified workers to accept intensified working practices.

Keywords: work intensification; individual values; labour relations; high-performance; work systems.

Pressão, Performance e Prestígio: Dilemas do Profissional Contemporâneo

Resumo

As transformações recentes ocorridas no mundo do trabalho trouxeram, dentre várias consequências, a intensificação do trabalho. Apesar dos ganhos de produtividade advindos desse processo, cada vez mais são exigidos dos trabalhadores maiores dispêndios de energia física e mental, o que tende a produzir impactos negativos sobre o seu bem-estar. O interesse em entender esse fenômeno motivou a realização de uma pesquisa qualitativa que buscou analisar a experiência de profissionais com formação superior inseridos em organizações que utilizam práticas de alta *performance*, que tendem a gerar intensificação do trabalho. Os relatos dos entrevistados revelaram tanto implicações negativas de se trabalhar sob condições de intensificação, como o aumento da jornada de trabalho, o excesso de pressão e o sacrifício da vida pessoal, quanto aspectos considerados positivos, tais como o aprendizado, o crescimento profissional, a autonomia e os ganhos financeiros. Estes últimos aspectos merecem atenção, pois ajudam a compreender o que leva trabalhadores qualificados a aceitarem trabalhar de forma intensificada.

Palavras-chave: intensificação do trabalho; valores individuais; relações de trabalho; sistemas de trabalho; alta performance.

**PhD in Sociology from the University Research Institute of Rio de Janeiro (Instituto Universitário de Pesquisas do Rio de Janeiro: IUPERJ). IAG Business School of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (IAG Escola de Negócios da Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Rio de Janeiro: IAG-PUC-Rio). E-mail: aheloisa@iag.puc-rio.br*
***Master in Business Administration from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Rio de Janeiro: PUC-Rio). IAG/PUC-Rio. E-mail:lenasajon@hotmail.com*
****PhD in Business Administration from the Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration/ Getulio Vargas Foundation (Escola Brasileira de Administração Pública e de Empresas/Fundação Getulio Vargas: EBAPE/FGV). IAG/PUC-Rio. E-mail:alessandra.costa@iag.puc-rio.br*

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the intensifying of the working day has been the focus of a number of research studies. Burke (2009) argues that these are "hot topics". Within this field, although results have identified aspects that might be considered positive for organizations and individuals in terms of increased productivity and salary gains (GREEN, 2001; 2004), discussions about negative features and aspects appear to dominate the literature (BROWN & BENSON, 2005; HEWLETT & LUCE, 2006; BOLTANSKI & CHIAPELLO, 2007). Results regarding burnout (BARNETT, GAREIS & BRENNAN, 1999), psychological problems (KIRKCALDY, LEVINE & SHEPARD, 2000), family conflicts (CROUTER *et al.,* 2001), fatigue, irritability and increased accidents at work (DEMBE *et al.,* 2005) are some of the problems indicated in studies that discuss the effects of the increased working day. It is understood that when intensity is greater, it requires higher employee performance, whether that be physical, intellectual or psychological (PORTER, 2001, 2004; GREEN; 2004; BURKE & FISKENBAUN, 2009).

However, from the employee's perspective, this new work dynamic appears paradoxical, since, alongside the possible financial gains arising from greater involvement at work, we cannot ignore the resulting physical and mental stress, which has led us to return to the question posed by Burke (2009, p.169): "Why do people choose to work long hours?" According to the author, some people have to do two jobs to survive, while others can make choices (BURKE, 2009). Regarding this second group, despite the deleterious aspects associated with increased work intensity reported in the literature (MCCANN, MORRIS & HASSARD, 2008), several studies suggest the existence of professionals who, despite working intensively long hours every day, state that they are satisfied with their jobs (GREEN, 2004; MACKY & BOXXAL, 2008; BURKE & FISKENBAUN, 2009).

Our study was therefore guided by the fact that, on the one hand, the work dynamic is changing and becoming more intense, and, on the other, a significant contingent of professionals frequently appear to justify their decision to work under such conditions. We sought to understand both these professionals' work dynamics and what leads qualified professionals to work in organizations and activities that demand intense dedication. In order to better understand this paradox – the dynamic of more intense and prolonged work *versus* professionals who consider these conditions to be satisfactory – the study analysed interviews with thirteen Brazilian professionals who work in organizations oriented by high-performance practices. In order to present the results, this article is divided into five sections, including this one. The second section is dedicated to discussing the phenomenon of work intensification in the existing literature; the third presents the research methodology; the fourth deals with the interview analysis, whereas final considerations are provided in the last section.

2. Transformations in the Production Sector and their Effects on Work Intensification

In discussing the work intensification process, Green (2004) draws attention to evidence which suggests that this phenomenon is gaining ground. According to the author, external market pressure causes companies to be concerned about cost reductions and increased product and service quality, aimed at competitive advantage. This pressure has consequently been pushed onto the workforce, which has been pressurized into expending greater efforts. Further, growing levels of work insecurity have led to fears of job loss, also causing work efforts to intensify. According to Green, changes are aimed at increasing efforts and improving worker qualifications and skills. Often, companies require employee identification with company goals, which translates into acceptance of the need to expend greater efforts to meet tighter deadlines, in order to more rapidly meet consumer demands and increase the company's global competitiveness.

Transformations in the world of work have also increased demands for employee flexibility and the development of further skills, at the same time that socializing outside work has reduced and job insecurity has increased (BOLTANSKI & CHIAPELLO, 2007). Information technology modernizations, allied to developments in internal company communications have increased capacity to monitor work processes, generating more psychological pressure for workers. Employee insecurity has increased as employees have begun to see the risks associated with not performing according to employer expectations. As a result of these feelings of insecurity, individuals have redoubled their efforts to improve their productivity, both qualitatively and quantitatively (GREEN, 2001; 2004; ROSSO, 2008). In relation to this, Antunes (2006) emphasizes that more stable work is suffering unprecedented pressure towards intensification, since employees are expected to be constantly available and submit to extremely variable working hours.

For Porter (2001), involving people in work appears to be increasing, in that they are always being asked to do more. The author asserts that organizational change initiatives have only succeeded through human effort. For him, the recent trend demonstrates that every change a company puts in place increases demands on individuals, often making them feel "stretched" to the limit, since they are being asked to do more with less. According to Porter, the idea of excessive work is contained in a particular "strong work ethic" defined in the following terms: always at work, work is unquestioningly the number one priority, and the more work, the better. This ethic leads people to work harder every day, reducing their opportunities for free time and leisure. Finally, as Green (2001) notes, it is possible that economic performance may be increased through increased pressure for greater efforts to be made at work, however, the author argues that this is not something that can continue indefinitely.

Burke and Fiskenbaun (2009) highlight some of the characteristics of intensified working that are principally responsible for the greater pressure workers are under, namely: a) the unpredictable scope of work; b) working according to tight deadlines; c) scope of responsibility related to more than one role; d) events related to working outside normal working hours; e) the need to be available 24 hours a day; f) direct responsibility for profit and loss; g) a great deal of travel; h) the large number of reports made to management; and i) physical presence at the workplace for at least 10 hours a day. The authors conclude that professionals are currently working long hours every day, intensely, with less holiday time, and often having to cancel their holidays. One significant point the authors address is that these same employees state that they love their work. They allege that work is stimulating and challenging; that they work with highly skilled professionals; that they receive high salaries and enjoy status and recognition. This apparent satisfaction with work, despite its intensity, is also reported in other studies dedicated to organizations that adopt high-performance work systems (MACKY & BOXALL, 2008; KODZ *et al*., 1998; JOHANN, 2004).

3. High-performance Work Systems and Work Intensification

White *et al.* (2003) label practices used to obtain greater discretionary effort from employees as high-performance or high commitment. Such practices involve a combination of work organization and human resource policies to promote greater participation in decision-making, provide opportunities to learn new skills and financial incentives to offer greater discretionary effort to serve the company's objectives. For the authors, these practices generally presuppose career development, training and performance-related pay. Some of the mechanisms companies use in attempting to increase worker productivity may function to boost and intensify work. We may highlighted them thus: (a) lengthening and intensifying the working day; (b) functionally polyvalent workers; (c) flexibility; (d) results-based management; (e) participatory management; (f) use of information technology; and (g) the adoption of variable pay systems.

In terms of the lengthening of the working day, the perception is that working 40 hours a week can already be considered outdated, almost part-time. There are many executives who work between 60 and 70 hours a week and these hours place them under extreme pressure. The reasons for this increase include activity overload, expectations of rewards associated with better results, peer pressure, and explicit demands from superiors (HEWLETT & LUCE, 2006; BURKE & FISKENBAUN, 2009). Health risks associated with tiredness and anxiety increase as a consequence of extended working hours, (BOLTANSKI & CHIAPELLO, 2007).

Polyvalence represents the capacity to carry out a range of diverse activities at the same time, which means doing more work in the same working day; the employee begins to take care of a number of processes, performing different operations within each. The employee's engagement in work becomes polyvalent, in the sense that they act on a range of fronts at the same time. In this way, there is greater occupation of the working day, leading to a certain sense of full employment in productive work (GREEN, 2004; ROSSO, 2006).

Flexibility is considered to be one of the main pivots of new company strategies and is related to work intensification, since it transfers the weight of market uncertainties onto the organization's employees (BOLTANSKI & CHIAPELLO, 2007). Companies that seek to incorporate flexibility into their daily life, organize their workforce into autonomous teams, with no unity of place or time, in other words, partly at a distance, with internal or external partners, with some full-time and some part-time members. Thus, the most valued workers, according to staff management based on flexibility, are those who are open to changing their routines and projects and who permanently manage to adapt to new circumstances (ANTUNES, 2006; CRUBELLATE, 2004). According to Boltanski and Chiapello (2007), this logic of constant change may be transferred to other employee attributes, so that certain qualities may also be permanently dispossessed, since they must be transformed as the situation demands. Thus, professionals are required to develop a new skill, that of being capable of recognizing, within their working circumstances, which properties they should have recourse to, in order to respond to certain demands.

Results-based management also functions as a work intensification mechanism, and is considered to be the principal source of pressure on workers. Performance appraisals provide employees with a sense of overload as a result of the increased number of reports and assessments required. This cycle has an impact on a number of other human resource processes and on administrative decisions about the employee's future, in terms of possible promotion, growth and remuneration. The expectation of a good appraisal operates as an incentive for hard work, since the quantity of work produced and the number of hours spent at work have weight in assessor decisions. The fear of the negative consequences of a bad performance appraisal by a supervisor creates a sense of mental and physical overload. This proves how this management mechanism may have an adverse impact on employees, while, at the same time, making companies think employee performance is improving as a result of continuous assessment, since this method enables them to determine which of their employees are making the greater efforts at work. (BROWN & BENSON, 2005).

White *et al.* (2003) suggest that the human resources management model, which involves participatory management, obtains high discretionary employee engagement. This effect is caused by an ideology that generates an employee expectation that they must, above all, demonstrate high commitment and performance, even if such efforts may have a negative impact on their personal lives. The attainment of this objective is, in the authors' view, organized through empowerment, motivation programmes, teamwork, quality circles and skills and career development. All these human resource practices are aimed at motivating higher performance levels and commitment and encouraging employees' discretionary effort in their work (GREEN, 2004; ANTUNES, 2006).

The use of technological resources, which provide greater connectivity, also contribute to the work intensification process. Modern communication has led to changing behaviour and expectations, which can be witnessed by the fact that people always carry mobile phones, whatever the day, time or event. Thus, companies have

begun to expect maximum employee availability and, through this, maintain abusive practices in terms of their expectations of professionals' time and energy (PORTER, 2001; HEWLETT & LUCE, 2006; BURKE & FISKENBAUN, 2009).

Finally, the variable remuneration could also be considered an instrument of work intensification. Employees perceive this form of remuneration as both an opportunity and a risk. The opportunity refers to the possibility of obtaining greater compensation for higher performance, while the risk refers to the possibility of receiving less reward for lower performance. Performance-related pay violates the principle of collectivism as it promotes the understanding that individual appraisal is more important and that those who receive more will remain at the company longer. The individualization of work circumstances, particularly of remuneration, gives companies greater dominance over each employee, enabling them to apply greater pressure on their employees (BOLTANSKI & CHIAPELLO, 2007). The differentiation and individualization of remuneration means that pay is conditioned by individual performance or by the results of the unit in which the professional works and thus become linked to personal properties and appraisal at higher levels (CHANG & BILLS, 1999; WHITE, *et al*., 2003).

4. Methodology

Assuming that long working days, periodic evaluations and variable remuneration are factors in the contemporary management of some companies, and that they contribute to work intensification (WHITE *et al*., 2003), we selected our interview respondents according to the following criteria: (a) they work, on average, twelve hours a day (without this being formally imposed on them); (b) most of their pay is represented by variable bonuses, distributed according to employee performance and the organization itself; and (c) the management model of the organization in which they work is guided by high performance practices, which tend to include aspects such as polyvalent functions, flexibility, results-based management, participatory management, the use of information technology, and the adoption of variable pay systems.

We opted to conduct a qualitative study, which attempts to understand a specific phenomenon in depth. This was because our focus was to analyse how the participants experienced and assessed their work dynamic, which included elements of intensification. Since we understand that the way this experience is perceived is subjective, our data was obtained through interviews, in most cases at the respondents' workplace.

The interview subjects were identified through the researchers' networks and by personal recommendations from people who work in organizations that adopt performance-related practices. Thirteen individuals participated in the study, five women and eight men from nine different companies, located in Rio de Janeiro. The respondents worked in posts at various levels, from trainees to directors and associates, and in a range of areas, such as finance, commerce, human resources, legal, accounting and others. All the participants were graduates, aged between 21 and 33, and had worked at their company for between six months and seven years. In terms of age, it was not the researchers' intention to only interview young people, but these emerged from the recommendations, possibly reflecting the work dynamic we focused on. Table 1 summarizes the principal respondent characteristics.

Table 1 – Respondent profile

Respondent	Area of operation	Organizational Line	Current post	Age	Time at Company
1	Personnel Management	Shopping Centre	Coordinator	24	2 years
2	Finance	Corporation	Director	26	7 years
3	Commerce and Marketing	Shopping Centre	Coordinator	27	2 years & 2 months

Respondent	Area of operation	Organizational Line	Current post	Age	Time at Company
4	Finance and New Business	Investment Fund	Associate	30	4 years
5	Finance and Borrowing	Corporation	Manager	29	6 years
6	Accounting	Corporation	Analyst	25	1 years & 6 months
7	Trading Desk	Investment Fund	Career Manager	24	4 years
8	Legal	Corporation	Leader	33	1 years & 6 months
9	Marketing	Cosmetic Products	Analyst	29	5 years
10	Corporate Sustainability	Telephones	Trainee	21	1 year
11	Management and Organizational Culture	Consultancy	Associate	#	#
12	Accounting/HR Management	Retail Sales	Coordinator	27	4 years
13	Human Resources	Banking	Analyst	26	6 months

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The interview guide was based on open-ended questions about the number of hours worked; the working pace; the existence of performance assessments, targets and results; the variable remuneration system; management style; and the influence of work on personal life. During the interview, other questions also emerged, which further enriched our conversations. The interviews lasted between 30 and 50 minutes and were recorded and transcribed in their entirety by the researchers themselves.

The data was analysed through content analysis, enabling the construction of *a posteriori* categories, which helped to identify the respondents' working conditions, reflecting a dynamic of intensification, and their justifications for adhering to this way of working. These categories guided the structure of the following item, dedicated to analysing the results.

5. Result Analysis

This section presents the results of our analysis of the interview responses, aiming to understand both their work dynamic and what leads qualified professionals to work in organizations and activities that demand intense dedication. The reports were organized into two parts. The first part covers aspects related to work intensification, summarizing the negative aspects related to the respondents experience, namely: (a) lengthening of the working day, (b) increased pace of work; (c) need for flexibility and polyvalence; (a) results-based management. The second part, on the other hand, covers reports that have received scant attention in the literature, namely positive meanings associated with intensified working. According to the respondents: (a) learning; (b) rapid professional growth; (c) attractive variable pay; (d) meritocracy; and (e) professional autonomy are the principal gains related to working in companies described as high performance. The following section expresses, discusses and illustrates these categories.

5.1. Working More: The Perceived Costs

In describing their working conditions, the respondents appear to experience most of the situations described by the literature as typical of work intensification, as well as the deleterious effects associated with an extended working day, increased pace of work, demand for flexibility and polyvalence, and pressure for results. Despite asserting, at certain times, that they liked their jobs and chose to work for high performance companies, the respondents did not refrain from highlighting the burden of working under these conditions. The following sections discuss some of the aspects highlighted in the interviews.

5.1.1 Increasing the Working Day and the Pace of Work

This first section deals with the lengthening of the working day and increased pace of work. Several references to long working days were identified in the interviews. Alongside longer days, we see a demand for full availability and, consequently, more time dedicated to the job. The interview discussions are in accordance with the literature, which highlights growing, implicit and explicit, pressure from companies for professionals to habitually work long hours and more intensely (ANTUNES, 2006; GREEN; 2001; 2004; GREEN & MCINTOSH, 2001; ROSSO, 2006; PORTER, 2001; 2004). The follow reports illustrate this:

> Today, I get to work at 9am and I don't have a set time to leave. I leave at 8pm or 8:30. I must work about 11-12 hours a day. (E6)

> I get to work at eight am and leave at half past nine at night. I get home and I read a little and I work a little bit more at the weekend. (E4)

Despite working long hours, the pace and speed with which work is carried out during these hours seems to be what the respondents consider to demand the most sacrifice. This is in accordance with what Hewlett and Luce (2006) call extreme jobs, that is, jobs in which subjects are submitted to intensification that translates into not only long, but also more taxing hours in terms of pressure and pace, which makes these positions particularly stressful. The respondents say that they are subjected to an intense pace of work and confirm that pressure is high during the working day. It is worth noting that, in several interviews, we identified the expression 'the mortality rate of people in the company' to express this pressure:

> [The company] (...) forces staff turnover. They have an interest in the worst ones resigning and making room for certain people who stand out. That's business. (E1)

> It's well-known that companies in this group have a very high pace, a very fast pace of work. The mortality rate is very high, as people resign because they can't stand the pace. (E9)

> The companies are really like funnels, the base is very large, it's very difficult to get out of the base (...) the base is (...) very large, because the mortality rate within these companies is very high. (E4)

All the professionals feel they are being held to account and pressured, which interferes with their personal lives because they are constantly thinking about work. Some of the respondents felt that they needed to be alert during the entire working day:

> Some of the people who work with me are my friends (...) but we are not friends during work. I can't be very warm, chat with them, when people start chatting I feel like I'm letting things build up, that dust is accumulating. (E3).

Furthermore, work supported by non-portable and portable computers, smart phones and other technologies tends to disrupt the pattern of clearly separated work and non-work time, since the boundaries between these times has become so diffuse (BURKE & FISKENBAUN, 2009; PORTER, 2001; BOLTANSKI & CHIAPELLO, 2007;

ROSSO, 2006). The respondents' experiences highlight the role of technological developments in work intensification and illustrate the sensation they described of never switching off from work, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, particularly as a result of using mobile phones connected to the company e-mail:

> I have my own Blackberry, which doesn't belong to the company, but it's got the company e-mail, so I respond to e-mails as soon as I get them (...) Saturday night. I never switch off. I only turn it off during holidays, when I'm out of the country (...) But not at any other time. (E1)

Finally, several respondents reported the feeling that they have given up other non-work activities in their lives due to the intensity and stress of their daily work. This stress appears even when the respondents consider questions that could be considered more trivial, such as time during the day to do physical activities or courses:

> I'm not going to say that I don't want to have a personal life, but my routine doesn't allow me to go to the gym or do a course. (E1).

The demands of work can also be identified in more problematic cases, as described by one of the respondents in relation to an employee who was on maternity leave and could not extricate herself from the issues and demands of her daily job:

> There are people who give their life to work (...) but at certain moments these people's personal lives have to be respected (...) when someone goes on maternity leave, you shouldn't call them the whole time. Carol had a premature baby, she was in Intensive Care, and Marina called her the whole time. Every day. (E1).

5.1.2. Demand for Polyvalence and Flexibility

All the interviews highlighted the importance of the next topic: employee polyvalence and flexibility. The polyvalence demanded by companies makes the employee focus on several tasks simultaneously, so that work becomes more intense and requires greater commitment, thereby consuming more physical, emotional and cognitive energy (ANTUNES, 2006; BOLTANSKI & CHIAPELLO, 2007; GREEN, 2004; 2001; CRUBELLATE, 2004).

Polyvalence has been associated with a demand for multiple qualifications and translates into a need for employees to demonstrate that they are capable of numerous and various tasks. The requirement to be capable of performing a range of activities emerged in the interviews in various ways:

> You have various things to do at the same and very few people to do them (...) In this philosophy, the bone they give you is too big to chew (E2).

> There are only four of us, and lots of meetings and we also have to do the intellectual bit (...) this equalization of time is very complicated, because there are not enough people in the team to meet so many needs. Sometimes you are doing an analysis, but you are alone in a big room with five hundred people demanding things from you. (E11)

As well as polyvalence, there is also demand for flexibility. The respondents indicate that this experience manifests itself in a need to be available to work in a range of locations, when the company judges it interesting or necessary to relocate them. Faced with this situation, they feel that the challenge is to adapt quickly to the different demands imposed on them, so they can continue in the organization and not be dismissed, even if this involves a geographical move:

> When I was promoted, there was no vacancy in the Rio portfolio, the vacancy was filled, there was only Minas and Goiânia, so I said: you can send me wherever you think is best. (E1)

The respondent reports also demonstrate that this demand for flexibility is linked to uncertainty and risk about the future, since what appears to be in play is what Antunes (2006) called establishing circumstances where agreements are always provisional. In several statements, however, it is not the company that experiences

uncertainty and risk, but rather this is transferred to the employees themselves, as seen in the following statement:

> Where will you be in five years? I have no way of knowing. It's related to what people manage to build. If the company doesn't grow, you can't move up (...) if you don't push the cart, you won't get anywhere, so the greater objective is: the shareholders have to make money from this (...) things move in line with what the associate brings in. (E2)

5.1.3. Pressure for Results

As discussed in the literature, this third section also suggests one way of generating work intensification by demonstrating a philosophy of demanding, "better results, all the time", and furthermore, by making individuals responsible for constantly improving in order to attain the company's goals (ROSSO, 2006; BROWN & BENSON, 2005; BOLTANSKI & CHIAPELLO, 2007; GREEN; 2004; 2001). In the reports, we were able to identify that the appraisal of the attainment or otherwise of expected results involves decision-making about the future of each member of the organization, which demonstrates the burden and significance of a good assessment for the employees:

> Pressure is inherent in this work because you have to have a result every day and you are judged by the number that goes into the daily report. Everyone in the company knows everyone else's exact results for the month, day, year. (E8)

The respondents report that their fixed targets are always highly aggressive, which increases the sensation of pressure in routine work. Despite legitimizing this system, since they understand that this is the game and it has clear rules, these individuals confirm that they are under a lot of pressure. The following statements illustrate their experience of results-based management:

> The whole company has to be measured (performance)! People know what the game is, but it means always being held to account, a lot of pressure, a lot of dedication. (E2)

> We have to deliver on so much for so few people. The delivery target is very high and the team is tiny. We have to deliver on a lot of things and if the team always delivered, they would demand more and more, they wouldn't be happy. If you deliver five in one year, they want ten the next. You are always at your limit. (E3)

Our analysis of respondent perceptions of the results-based management model also allowed us to see that they sometimes experience a feeling of injustice about the appraisal process, since only employee results are taken into consideration. In other words, according to the respondents, even if other intervening factors affect attainment of the stipulated target, these are not taken into consideration as moderating factors:

> Results-based management is a fair way of seeing who is delivering and who is not, but the world is not robotic and the variables are infinite. (E1)

> You have to learn the hard way, because you have a target and you have to do everything you can to deliver it, independent of anything else. (E3)

Tension may therefore further increase as a result of an anticipated negative impact, should the specific objective not be achieved, even if other variables have influenced this.

It is worth noting that the variable pay mechanism, associated with results-based management, also increases pressure at work and demand for greater efforts, arising from both a desire to receive the rewards on offer and a fear of the potentially negative consequences associated with not meeting targets. Those who do not meet expectations are not only punished by not being remunerated, but, more importantly, run the risk of losing their job or being viewed negatively in their work environment:

> When you meet a target it's great, you're going to earn money and other things because of it, but when you don't meet a target, everyone knows about it and if you regularly don't meet your targets, you will probably be fired. (E8)

Despite the negative aspects associated with intensified working conditions, attention also focused on the fact that employees allege that they like their jobs and positively evaluate management practices which put added pressure on their performance. For this reason, the next section presents and discusses the main points these employees described as positive in their daily working life.

5.2 Working More: Reasons and Alleged Benefits

At the same time as reporting the costs and, to a certain extent, the negative aspects resulting from intensified working conditions and the lengthening working day, the respondents also indicated the benefits associated with this work dynamic. This aspect is less explored in the literature, which tends to emphasize the deleterious aspects of an increased workload. It deserves greater attention, however, because it helps to explain so many professionals' apparently voluntary adherence to high performance work. The respondents describe learning and rapid professional growth; attractive variable remuneration; meritocracy; autonomy and greater responsibility as the principal perceived gains of this management practice. The following sections attempt to organize their reports, identifying and illustrating these points.

5.2.1 Learning and Rapid Professional Growth

This item refers to the respondents' perceived opportunities for learning and rapid professional growth.

Despite experiencing a great deal of stress in their daily work, the respondents stated that working in organizations that require extended working hours was a personal choice and, conversely, that they encountered opportunities for a more rapid rise in such organizations, as well as alleged gains in learning about management practices.

Words such as "learning" and "growth" appear in the respondents' statements and they repeat them several times:

> Because, in fact, what I want is simple: I want to be in a place where there is rapid growth and financial remuneration because of this and where I can learn a lot. (E6)

> Opportunity to learn is the key to business, without this I would never dedicate so many hours, or wake up thinking about how the day is going to be, go to sleep thinking about work, rushing lunch. (E2)

The fact that they were all young and ambitious may explain this almost obsessive search for growth. Moreover, the respondents believe that their current efforts will be rewarded in the near future and see extreme dedication as an investment in their careers:

> I'm always thinking about how to do things, if I close this deal will I become a manger in six months? Will I receive a raise tomorrow? How much will the bonus be? Will the president come up to me and say I am the guy? (E7)

However, precisely because they are predominantly young, the majority of these individuals see intense dedication to their work as an necessary stage in professional maturity and make a point of stressing that there is a limit - they do not intend to work at this pace for a long time, since the costs of "high performance" are high:

> I want to make quick money, I'm going to retire at 40. I'm not going to work anymore (...). Because nobody can stand this burden of pressure forever. (E2)

Further, despite the pressure and losses arising from extreme job dedication, the respondents stress that the investment and sacrifice are worthwhile. That is, one can postulate that the respondents accept working in conditions that they recognize as necessitating sacrifices, because they see these sacrifices as transitory, as a necessary stage in their professional trajectory and, above all, as a pathway to rapid professional promotion:

> I don't think it's great to work 12 hours a day, because I miss a lot of things, I risk my health, but if you weigh it up, I win, I create a lot, I have autonomy, I learn more quickly and I earn more. So, I think the benefits outweigh [the costs]. (E1)

> Today, I am 27 years old and I know that I'm sacrificing part of my youth for a long-term project. I'm sure I have friends who take extended holidays, go away at the weekends, and I know that if I wasn't working I would have the same lifestyle, but I also know that in the future I will be able to have a lifestyle that will make up for all this. All this time investment that I'm making now will be rewarded in the future. (E4)

5.2.2. Attractive Variable Remuneration

Variable remuneration and awards for productivity, which in the literature are cited as conducive to work intensification (CHANG & BILLS 1999; BOLTANSKI & CHIAPELLO, 2007; ANTUNES, 2006) have, in the respondents' view, positive effects, since they experience this form of remuneration as objective, fair and meritocratic:

> What you gain and what you lose is highly objective; you don't depend on anyone else, that's very clear. You meet the target, you earn money, full stop. It doesn't depend on a conversation, on politics... This is positive. I think it's great. (E8)

> The targets policy is always very aggressive and variable pay occurs through meritocracy. You will be remunerated according to your development and meeting your targets. (E9)

It is worth mentioning that, according to Boltanski & Chiapello (2007), results-based management and variable remuneration are aimed at increasing employee involvement and sense of responsibility and self-control, thus obtaining greater engagement in work situations. However, although the authors criticized this aspect, some of the respondents also value it:

> I love it! I think that the targets give your work direction. It's a fair way for you to see who is delivering and who isn't. (E1)

> I think it's very good because it gives you focus, I'm not saying that if we didn't have targets, I wouldn't be here, but it obliges you to look every day, every hour. And at the end of six months, you can objectively measure who was good and who was bad. (E3)

Apparently, despite the pressure inherent in this remuneration system, the respondents appear to value it, since it is associated with aggressive targets, provoking a feeling that they are being encouraged to meet them.

5.2.3. Meritocracy

The topic of meritocracy also appears positively in the interviews with the respondents stating that they value meritocratic personnel management practices. According to most of the respondents, these practices characterize the organizations in which they work. Thus, obtaining recognition in pecuniary form, through promotions or the assignment of new challenges, appear to be important aspirations for these professionals, who endeavour to live up to this recognition:

> It's well-known that the companies in group X are meritocratic companies, with a very intense pace of work, a very fast pace. These companies are really like funnels, the base is very large, it's very difficult to rise from the bottom, but this rise is faster in these companies than in the market as a whole. (E4)

The respondents frequently cited a desire to be recognized and valued and this appears to be the principal reward they expect in compensation for so much dedication and "passion" for the job:

> Rapid meritocratic growth (...) It has to be a place where I can grow. Because just walking along is agonizing. (...) Recognition, in the sense of meritocracy. You will be rewarded for your merits and for the things that you did, and not how much time you have been there or who you know. (E6)

5.2.4. Greater Responsibility and Professional Autonomy

In this last section, the issue of increased individual responsibility also appears to be valued by the respondents, despite the critical literature suggesting that it is a problem, since it puts greater pressure on the employee and increasingly involves them subjectively (ROSSO, 2006; ANTUNES, 2006; WHITE *et al*., 2003; GREEN, 2004; PORTER, 2004; BURKE & FISKENBAUN, 2009; MACKY & BOXALL, 2008). The following statement illustrates this point:

> As long as the person who comes in is very responsible, precisely because they are used to the business culture of a lot of work and a lot of responsibility (...) Everyone has a lot of responsibility from the beginning. (E9)

Being responsible for projects considered to be strategic and having the autonomy to make important decisions were attractive features for our respondents, who may thus feel there is something different about the company in which they work. This greater involvement is often subjective and appears in the statements in the form of a discourse that emphasizes an emotional bond with work, not limited to formal working hours. This experience is reported as positive and is understood as indicative of an individual's "love" for their work.

> The difference between having a job and a career is that a job is something you go to from 9am to 6pm, you leave at night, it's finished and you go off to gossip. Not me! X is my life, it's different. (E1)

> To some extent, I'm in love with my job, but there are times when I stop and think that I'm too caught up in it. Then I go and read the paper. At the time of the election (...) Imagine, nobody talked about the election, nobody said that Bin Laden had died. You know, I miss this a bit, the outside world. (E3)

However, these same respondents recognize that this responsibility has a cost:

> As long as a person demonstrates a certain commitment and effort they gain more responsibility at xxx, but this responsibility isn't free. It comes with pressure, with being held to account, with more stress. (E3)

6. Final Considerations

In view of the fact that work dynamics are undergoing a process of modification, making them more intense and prolonged, this study aimed to analyse the experiences of professionals who work for long hours under intense conditions, highlighting both the negative aspects of this dynamic and those aspects the employees potentially perceived as positive, reinforcing their adherence to so-called "high performance work systems".

An analysis of the reports made by the professionals we interviewed revealed that they are almost always working under pressure, meaning that they have to work at a fast pace throughout the whole day. They work long hours every day and these hours are intense and stressful, due to the levels of physical and mental energy demanded. This pressure appears, to a large extent, to arise from the fact that they are required to achieve objectively measureable results and meet targets that the subjects consider relentless.

Another element that seems to contribute to this feeling of intensified work is through psychological encroachment on the time when the professional is not working. In other words, our analysis of the interviews revealed a sensation of overspill of pressure from work into times when the professional is not at work, such as at weekends, or at night, after they have left the company. This encroachment of their professional lives on their private lives appears to result from a significant emotional engagement in work. The intense involvement of the respondents with their job reinforces the fact that work is central to the construction of their identities. There are also important effects on self-esteem, since these professionals feel competent, and therefore worthy of social value.

Furthermore, the respondents appear to perceive the type of work they do as heroic, and are proud of the image of the organizations in which they work. Given that these organizations are known in the market as highly demanding of their professionals, contracting and maintaining only the "best", their members feel like "stars". This pride in being part of such a victorious and prestigious collective leads to an internalization of their company's values and adherence to and appreciation of its practices.

The analysis also suggested that, although the pace of work was onerous, the individuals chose to work in this way and considered the benefits to outweigh the costs. In this sense, although the respondents discussed the negative aspects of intensified work, they also drew attention to elements which gave them satisfaction in their jobs. Rapid professional growth, ongoing learning, meritocracy, variable remuneration, autonomy and greater responsibility are the principal "gains" from this type of work.

We can therefore postulate that choosing to work in an environment with observable work intensification conditions and an extended working day may be related to certain personal characteristics and values which shape the desires, needs and aspirations of employees who chose to work for organizations known as "high performance". It is worth noting, furthermore, that, although this was not intended by the researchers, all the respondents were young people, aged between 21 and 33 years old, allowing us to speculate that seeking work in high performance companies is the aspiration of ambitious young people at the beginning of their careers, desirous of prestige and personal and professional self-assertion.

We observed conclusively that the aspect that appears to be fundamental to an individual identifying with their respective organizations relates to the company's capacity to subjectively involve them by disseminating values that contribute to the construction of a desired heroic ideal, which such work symbolizes. The respondents' intense emotional engagement with their professional sphere reinforces the extent to which work is central to their identity construction. We could therefore say that the culture associated with the intensification of work is capable of creating unusual levels of motivation, loyalty and even fanaticism, enabling employees to interpret intensified work as something positive, in line with the wishes of the organization. The values disseminated by these organizations are able to provide an internalized ideological control structure for the employees, making it superfluous to control them extrinsically or bureaucratically. In other words, a new work culture appears to be under gestation, which guarantees the voluntary adherence of a certain strata of employees to a work dynamic that is increasingly extenuated. Even if we cannot extend this observation to the rest of the workforce, it is worth noting that it is qualified professionals, who generally have more options, who adhere, apparently voluntarily, to work systems which impose oppressive conditions. It remains to be seen whether workers with fewer choices would have greater resources to resist the pressures of the work dynamic that currently predominates.

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