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Chapter 1

OLD RULES, NEW REALITIES

The way we work is not sustainable. Sherwin knows this well. He has twenty years of experience as a skilled information technology (IT) professional and is one of the many professionals and managers we interviewed in a Fortune 500 company we call TOMO. Sherwin has a hybrid role where he designs new software solutions to address business problems but also participates directly in developing that new software; he's both a big picture thinker and attuned to the details of writing solid computer code. On the personal side, Sherwin is a divorced dad with two daughters who live mainly with him. He is also the point person for his elderly mother, who is deciding whether it is time to move into a nursing home.

Sherwin's family caregiving feels manageable; it is his workload on the job that is overwhelming. Sherwin estimates he works about 70 hours per week. He starts work with calls at 5 a.m., pauses to get his kids ready and off to school, works a full day, prepares dinner and supervises their homework, and then routinely works, at home, until midnight. The long hours and intense pace are perhaps not surprising given the managers he reports to. Sherwin's manager, Tanay, describes himself as a "super workaholic" and says his own boss (who sits two levels above Sherwin on the organizational chart) pushes teams so hard that he is "trying to get blood from a rock."

Sherwin is dedicated to his job and often excited about it. He enjoys the technical challenges of his work and appreciates the "tremendously talented people in this group . . . Wow, these guys are smart!" The feeling is mutual: Tanay conveys his respect for Sherwin's intelligence and skills when we interview him separately. But despite appreciating much

about his job, Sherwin knows the way he works is toxic. He recognizes that "never being able to get [all] the work done—[takes] a tremendous toll on me health-wise." His work patterns make it harder for him to take good care of himself. "You're staying up late, you're eating," and "the last thing in my mind was to get up and work out. Too tired." In fact, Sherwin recently had a heart attack, luckily a fairly minor one. He tells us:

> I didn't even realize it, just went into the doctor because I was not feeling well and they ran an EKG and they did some tests and said "You had a heart attack yesterday."

Sherwin was out of work for about four weeks to recover from this health crisis, but it has had a lasting impact. As he says, "I'm looking at things a lot differently in my life," and he hopes to work differently to take better care of himself.

The way Sherwin works and lives exemplifies the *overload*—the feeling of having too much to do in too little time—that so many professionals and managers confront today. These employees are privileged in terms of their pay, benefits, and the ability to work in clean and comfortable offices. They are generally treated with respect, with their contributions and ideas recognized.[1] These would seem to be "good jobs" in many ways. University of North Carolina sociologist Arne Kalleberg suggests we assess job quality by considering earnings, benefits, job security, and opportunities for advancement as well as how much autonomy or control employees have, how meaningful and interesting the tasks are, and how hours and schedules fit with the rest of life.

But these professionals and managers find that what had been good jobs have morphed into something more intense and less secure. New communication technologies foster an always-on, always-working culture. Managers and coworkers know they can contact employees anytime, anywhere, and they often do reach out before and after official workdays. Moreover, globalization, automation, and artificial intelligence make it clear to even the most educated, experienced, and skilled workers in a variety of occupations and industries that their jobs are changing radically, and may even disappear. Earnings and benefits are still relatively generous, but there is an increasing price to pay. Good jobs, previously

characterized by relative autonomy and security, have become bad, with rising workloads, a sped-up pace, and escalating expectations that seem impossible to meet.

Is this the future of work, shaped by warp-speed connectivity, ratcheting demands, and eroding security? These ways of working will either break organizations or break people. Outdated policies and expectations collide with the intense realities of the digital revolution and the global production of "knowledge work" (as well as manufacturing goods) to exacerbate burnout, stress, and poor health. Most businesses continue to demand 9 to 5 (or 8 to 6) desk time *in addition to* early morning calls to offshore colleagues, last-minute but all-too-common work requests at 10 p.m., and ubiquitous emails, texts, and instant messaging.

Alongside changes tied to new technologies and global competition, US companies are routinely merging, reorganizing, downsizing, even disappearing. This leaves all employees—even skilled professionals and middle managers—unsure whether they will have their jobs next year or even next week. Those who survive layoffs experience even more overload as they attempt to cover the work of their downsized coworkers. The firm resolves to "do more with less," and employees try frantically to make that happen.

Our interviews and surveys in TOMO's IT division demonstrate that overload harms workers. That is probably not a surprise to readers, and it is very clear to the professionals and managers we interviewed. Kunwar, a manager who supervises almost thirty employees and is also a wife and mother, explains that her 10 p.m. meetings mean her "entire evening is actually ruined" because she is "on edge" and busy preparing for the call. Similarly, taking a "status call" meeting at 5:30 or 6:30 in the morning on Saturday or Sunday, as she does regularly, affects the whole weekend day.

> You're not able to relax a lot, so it's definitely taking its toll on people's health and stress levels and maybe blood pressure without us knowing it. Sleep—not being able sleep—or not taking the time even to go and exercise. I'm definitely constantly thinking about work.

But we also see that overload creates problems for the organization that employs these professionals and managers. Working at breakneck speed means the work product is not as high quality as it could be. The problem is not a lack of talent but a lack of time. Firms that rely on knowledge workers seek to recruit and retain creative people who can innovate. But creativity and innovativeness are simply incompatible with burnout and exhaustion.

A manager explains that the software developers who report to him are frustrated because "different people are pinging them for information" all day. They are interrupted from writing their code because questions come at them via the chat software the company uses. These IT professionals feel "they go through the whole day, the whole week without doing what they were expected to do" during regular work hours, so they work late nights and weekends (like Sherwin) to try to catch up. The manager sees how this fast pace affects teamwork too, reporting "simmering tensions" because the team members are working under too much pressure to address any concerns.

> The pedal is pushed continuously . . . It's like full throttle. Keep moving [laughs]. You get hurt? Tough. Let's just get it [done] . . . I'm not saying I'm ignoring you, but sorry—we gotta get it done.

We ask if this pressure is due to a big deadline we know the team is facing in a few weeks (in September) and he explains that the intensity is routine:

> We had it like that for June. We have it like that for September. I see that already December is coming [along] that way.

Overload and the clash of old rules with new realities are not private troubles that employees and frontline managers can fix for themselves by getting up earlier, deciding on their own to not read email in the evening, or scaling back on family obligations. Solving these problems requires inventing new ways of working to promote sane and sustainable jobs, fostering effectiveness on the job, *and* insisting on a higher quality of life for workers of all genders, ages, educational levels, occupations, and life stages.[2]

We believe federal safety nets and labor regulations should be updated to address the new intensity and precarity of work, as well as the growing inequality in the United States and elsewhere. But corporations and other employers can also do something about overload. Drawing on our research with an interdisciplinary group of scholars called the Work, Family, and Health Network, we identify creative and practical ways to reshape how work works, which we call a dual-agenda work redesign. Dual-agenda work redesigns prompt employees and managers to look at how work can be changed in ways that benefit employees (and their families) and also benefit the organization. We demonstrate that those changes work well for employees, their families, and also the organizations that employ them.[3]

This study establishes that things can change for the better. Innovative initiatives like the one we describe can create a new normal. In that new normal, employees have greater authority to make their own decisions, managers and coworkers recognize and support the realities of life outside of work, and everyone focuses less on when and where the work happens and more on working effectively and efficiently together. Working "smarter" includes dropping some tasks and meetings and turning off technologies from time to time. We show that the rules, everyday practices, and expectations can be changed, even though, as our research in TOMO reveals, redesign is hard to sustain in the face of other organizational changes like new leaders in the executive ranks.

The status quo can seem intransigent. But there are ways forward to more sustainable, enjoyable, and effective work lives if we have the will, power, and imagination to push for that. This is, ultimately, a promising perspective on the future of work.

Who We Studied and How

We investigate overload and its consequences with data collected in a variety of ways—surveys, company records, ethnographic observations, and in-depth interviews—and we also summarize related research conducted by others. We then utilize evidence from a pathbreaking randomized field experiment to understand what can change and how.

Our study unfolds over about five years and includes data gathered from about a thousand employees and managers in the IT division of a large, Fortune 500 tech-focused company we call TOMO. The company isn't headquartered in Silicon Valley and it isn't known as a super exciting place to work, but it is generally viewed as a good employer and a decent corporate citizen. When we first started visiting TOMO offices, the fields of cubes seemed familiar to us from many white-collar workplaces we have observed as well as from pop culture. The IT professionals and managers we met are often middle-aged, wearing jeans or casual slacks and button-down cotton shirts or crisp sweaters, and largely white or people of South Asian descent. They fit with our cultural stereotypes of an engineer, though there are more women (roughly 40%) in IT at TOMO than in many tech organizations. What is less familiar, though, is the emptiness. On many floors, a third or more of the cubes are vacant, a visible reminder that the firm has repeatedly downsized workers as it expanded offshore and relied more on technology to automate or streamline the work.

This workforce includes people in a variety of IT-related occupations—software developers, quality assurance staff, project managers, and the analysts who translate the needs of clients into project plans for the other IT experts to build. Employees and managers are paid quite well, with an average salary over $90,000 in our IT sample, and their benefits were historically generous. In addition to the good salaries and benefits, employees at TOMO appreciate the generally respectful work environment, the intellectually challenging work, and being located in middle-American cities that have reasonable costs of living and attractive amenities. TOMO IT professionals have formidable technical skills, but their experiences are more akin to professionals and managers in other large US firms in the middle of the country than to those working in more famous tech companies in Silicon Valley or New York City. People in TOMO's IT division tend to stay with the company, assuming they are not downsized. On average, our respondents had worked at TOMO over fourteen years.

We have deliberately focused on technical professionals and frontline managers who are in "good jobs," but who are not among the most elite workers or at the very top of the wealth distributions. These professionals

and managers mostly have college degrees, earn salaries well above the median US salary, and receive good benefits as full-time employees. Recent studies of work often investigate either end of the occupational spectrum—those struggling in hourly service jobs, like retail or fast-food jobs, or those working in elite professional services firms, including well-known management consulting companies, financial firms, or "big law" practices.[4] We choose instead to study the middle, to concentrate on workers with college educations and earnings in the upper-middle class who are neither economic elites nor employed by the leading firms. The stories of intense work, insecurity, and overload that we hear in TOMO are probably familiar to many. Certainly when we share our findings with white-collar workers, professionals, and managers from a variety of different industries, people nod in recognition and often smile ruefully, recounting their own experiences of overload. We believe the people we studied at TOMO represent a much larger population of employees and managers in the United States today; their stories tell us about the realities of today and the possibilities for the future.

Our study involved multiple components and multiple people over a long time period; we conducted this research as part of the Work, Family, and Health Network, an exciting collaboration involving scholars from multiple disciplines at universities and research centers across the nation. Throughout the book, we share findings from published papers written by this team of scholars. However, the evidence we present here draws primarily on our own analysis of the tough realities facing these workers and the promise and challenges of organizational change in this firm and others. The two of us were in and out of the company for meetings, observations, interviews, and briefings with executives and others. Our research team included several "embedded" social scientists who were based in the firm to do participant observation, organize the rollout of repeated survey waves, conduct about four hundred interviews, and coordinate the training built into the dual-agenda work redesign we call STAR (for Support. Transform. Achieve. Results).[5]

Half the teams in the IT division at TOMO participated in the STAR redesign initiative while the other half served as the control group, who continued to work under the usual company policies. This experimental

design makes our evidence strong: teams were randomized to the STAR "treatment," and so the employees in the two groups reported the same strains, stresses, and attitudes at the beginning of the study. Comparing how the experiences and attitudes of those in the treatment and control conditions change over time reveals the effects of STAR. Our research team was committed to a rigorous design and to checking our own assumptions and hopes; the field experiment gave us confidence in assessing what changes and what does not with STAR.

This book describes the results of trying to change the informal norms and formal rules regarding when, where, and how work is done. STAR aims to give teams and the employees within them greater control regarding their time, how they meet project goals and deadlines, and how they use (or turn off) technology to get the job done and still take care of themselves. STAR also encourages managers to actively convey their support for their employees, recognizing their priorities and responsibilities both on and off the job. At the same time, organizational concerns are also important. STAR aims to make changes that do not interfere with getting the work done and that may even help the company perform better.

Studying organizational change as it happens in a real corporation is both challenging and gratifying. This research design allows us to exploit two very important lenses on the social world. First, when an organizational change like STAR is implemented, members of the organization are confronted with the question "How might it be otherwise?"[6] The way that work has traditionally been organized is not the only reasonable, rational, or feasible arrangement. It is simply the status quo, devised in the middle of the last century when technologies, tasks, workforces, and expectations were very different. The STAR process makes it clear to multiple stakeholders that the rules of the game can be changed. In fact, taken-for-granted policies, practices, interaction patterns, and assumptions are examined, rather than being assumed to be rational or optimal, through the collective, reflective process of this work redesign initiative. Professionals and managers in the STAR treatment group gain permission and indeed are encouraged to reimagine how they could get their jobs done in more sane and sustainable ways. We observed that questioning occur and tracked what happened as employees and

managers in STAR chose what to change, experimenting their way to a new normal. We hope this book prompts a similar reflective process for the reader, encouraging you to think critically about the way work is organized and how we can foster better ways of working in all kinds of jobs and in all industries.

Second, a key precept from social science is that we learn about social systems by trying to change them. Kurt Lewin, a famous organizational scholar, said, "If you want to truly understand something, try to change it."[7] Efforts to change work organizations prompt reactions—and those reactions are very informative regardless of whether the change succeeds in the intended ways. Our research design permits us to capture changes in practices, in interpretations, and in relationships, as well as how planned changes can derail. In our case, TOMO went through a merger during the course of the study and was acquired by a more conservative firm (which we call ZZT). The eventual revocation of STAR in the aftermath of that merger tells us almost as much about the corporate world in these intense, insecure, and shifting times as we learn from the successful implementation of this initiative.

Reimagining Work in the Twenty-First Century

We use the case of organizational changes at TOMO as the centerpiece for a broader analysis. The first section of the book dives into what we have come to see as a key problem of our time, overload. What is overload and what are its consequences? How has overload become so ubiquitous? Defining the problem is important for identifying real solutions. Our own understandings of the problem evolved through this study. Although we have both investigated work and family concerns for much of our academic careers, we now believe that the core concern for many professionals and managers is not *balancing* work and family obligations, but rather how to manage all that one is asked to do *at work*.

In other words, we locate the root problem not in the ways work and family connect and conflict but in intensified work itself. This is an important shift in the framing of the problem. We have come to worry that a

work–family framing is problematic because then the problem is seen as a women's issue or as primarily the concern of working mothers along with some involved fathers.[8] But overload affects men and women workers at all ages and life stages. Work isn't challenging only for mothers, for fathers, or for those caring for aging partners or parents or confronting their own health challenges. Younger workers—often millennials with no family responsibilities—still feel they "should be working all the time," while many of the baby boomers we interviewed felt overloaded and burned out too.[9] Overload is pervasive and these intensive ways of working put health, well-being, productivity, and innovation at risk.

The second section of the book introduces and evaluates a potential solution to address overload and foster new ways of working. We investigate a particular initiative we call STAR as one example of the dual-agenda work redesign strategy. The changes prompted by STAR may include shifting schedules, working at home when feasible, questioning meetings and "low-value" tasks so that people can focus on the core of their work, and more. These work practices can be viewed as workplace flexibility, but we also investigate how flexibility means different things in different contexts. We need to craft forms of flexibility that actually help workers, rather than just pressing them to be always on and always available or asking them to give up good careers in order to get the flexibility and control they need.

The third section of the book examines possibilities for redesigning the way we work. Here we go beyond the case of STAR at TOMO. Organizations can do better for their employees while also doing better for the business (as we demonstrate in the second section). We identify pockets of change, exciting innovations in corporate and public policy, but we also recognize the challenges of making meaningful institutional change happen in a variety of contexts that reach a wide variety of workers. We conclude by sharing multiple avenues for creating more sane and sustainable work.

There is a path forward, and this study points to real possibilities for crafting new ways of working that do not take today's craziness for granted. But before we get there, we need to learn more about the problem of intensive work and the feelings of overload.

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