

# Managing workload – it's a fine balance

**Jill Flint-Taylor faces up to the reality of managing workload against a background of ever-increasing demands for improvement and cost savings**

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Since the publication of the Gershon review of public sector efficiency in 2004, organisations have been working hard to achieve the key goals of releasing resources to fund front-line services and improving the efficiency of service delivery.

There has been much talk of “more for less” and other variants on this. Inevitably this makes it all the more critical that workload is managed in an active and disciplined way by individuals and their managers.

What does this mean – other than the obvious requirement for individuals to prioritise effectively and for managers to ensure a fair and sensible distribution of tasks and responsibilities? If only it was that simple.

In reality, it is very difficult to manage the fine balance between having a satisfying, challenging and stimulating workload and tipping over into overload, stress and burn-out. For one thing, there are major differences from one person to another – work demands that are exciting and energising for one may be daunting and exhausting for another. Even for one person, things change and what is welcome and manageable at one time may become too much to cope with at another.

The active management of workload is a constant process of thinking ahead, planning, monitoring and fine-tuning – and challenging ourselves and others – to keep the balance right for ourselves, our teams and our organisation.

I'd like to share a few research findings and practical observations from our work in this area. The first relates to the distinction between overload and work-life balance. In auditing levels of wellbeing across organisations, we've found that the relationship between the two is not as simple as you might think. People often report being fine with their work-life balance, while being troubled by overload (e.g. “I am troubled that I do not have enough time to do my job as well as I would like”).

There are various reasons for this, but the important point here is not to treat issues of workload and work-life balance as one and the same thing. Don't assume, for example, that someone who manages their work/life balance efficiently is free of stress from overload at work.

We also need to understand the many drivers that motivate people to take on more than they can manage, starting with the fundamental need to have a sense of purpose in our lives.

Another obvious driver in the public sector is commitment to goals such as service delivery, poverty reduction, healthcare etc. Such drivers can lead to high levels of engagement and productivity in even the most challenging circumstances, but there is a fine line between this and “over-engagement”, poor productivity, stress and burn-out.

There are severe consequences for organisations

that exploit this commitment, but there are also significant risks where managers simply don't take sufficient care in managing the level of demand.

We also see too much of people taking on unnecessary tasks. Sometimes this is a simple matter of inefficient prioritising, but there are other reasons more difficult to tackle. For example, someone may volunteer to prepare a ministerial briefing – seeing this as an opportunity to enhance their own reputation and the reputation of the team, even though another team might be better suited to the task.

The real problem is when this behaviour becomes part of the culture – often because it is rewarded by managers in contradiction to the official line on prioritisation and teamwork. Similarly, people often spend more time on the aspects of their job that they enjoy most. Allowing some discretion in this is a very powerful motivator, but once again it needs to be carefully managed.

Google recognised this in its policy of allowing engineers to allocate 20 per cent of their workload to projects of their choosing – enabling it to attract talent and deliver 50 new products and features, including Google Earth.

Clearly individuals must take responsibility for monitoring their own workload, prioritising and alerting their managers to overload in good time. However, the overriding responsibility here must rest with the managers of teams and the leadership of the organisation.

In previous columns I've covered the need for leaders to manage the risks inherent in certain natural strengths, in order to “keep pressure positive” for others.

Our research in this area shows interesting links between the leader's natural style and risks of overload in the team. For example, we have identified a specific type of supportive “leadership impact” style that paradoxically puts the team at greater risk of overload. This collaborative style has its advantages – it is positively correlated with high levels of commitment in the team, for example. However, it carries the risk of creating overload through failure to manage performance or to push back against unreasonable demands from outside the group.

Other leadership risks that relate to overload include overconfidence about what can be achieved and an underestimation of potential obstacles and difficulties; ambition – desire to achieve at any cost; very high levels of personal energy and a failure to recognise that some people work best at a more measured pace; flexibility and enthusiasm for change to the point where objectives are constantly shifting and people are left struggling with the demands of new initiatives while still trying to implement the previous ones. Active, disciplined management of these risks is critical to ensuring wellbeing and productivity.