The Flexibility Paradox: Investigating the Relationship Between Workplace Autonomy and Perceived Overwork Among Employees in Modern Work Settings

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Abstract

The trend towards the flexible organization of the workplace in the modern workplace environment has transformed the experience of work of employees. In spite of the fact that autonomy is usually associated with increased motivation and job satisfaction, new evidence indicates that it may also lead to perceived overwork, particularly when the boundary between work and personal life is lost. This paper explores the phenomenon known as the flexibility paradox, whereby autonomy can equally be beneficial and detrimental, and manifests itself through overworking and burnout. The research will be based on quantitative correlational study design and simulated data that will reflect various work personalities (workaholics, laid-off employees, introverts, extroverts) to address the relationship between perceived autonomy and overwork in contemporary work environments. The outcomes will help the HR professionals, leaders, and policymakers to determine how to create flexible policies that safeguard employee well-being and maintain high productivity. The study provides a subtle understanding of the ever-changing requirements of the modern working culture by paying attention to individual variations in experiencing autonomy.

Keywords: workplace autonomy, perceived overwork, flexibility paradox, personality traits,

burnout, remote work, job design

1. Introduction

The force that shaped the modern workplace toward being hybrid, with digital tools and flexible schedules, served to nurture and enhance employee autonomy. It is more generally considered to be a motivator and a factor in job satisfaction and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Bhave, 2011). Autonomy, however, often blurred the boundaries between work and life and contributed toward issues of mental strain and emotional exhaustion. Thus came the paradox by which autonomy both empowers and overwhelms—termed the flexibility paradox (Chung, 2022; Mazmanian et al., 2013).

While in the classical job-design theories (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and motivational psychology, the benefits enjoyed by autonomy are well established, the contribution of perceived overwork, that is the subjective experience of being drained to the point of being constantly "on" mentally, remains under-researched, especially with regard to remote and hybrid working constructs. Such research has for the most part treated autonomy and overwork as independent realities, rarely engaging with their dynamic interaction or questions of moderation such as job roles, work mode, and demography. This study fills these gaps by taking up a quantitative correlational approach to investigate the autonomy-overwork relationship. In so doing, it uses Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the flexibility paradox framework to challenge the assumption inherent in much of the literature on workers' well-being, that autonomy invariably contributes to enhancing life. Therefore, this study contributes to both the academic discourse and the formulation of workplace policies regarding flexible work design.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Workplace Autonomy

Autonomy or perceived control refers to the employee's feeling of being able to decide how, when, and where they get their tasks done. The Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) both looked at autonomy as being central to meaningful work and intrinsic motivation. For example, empirical evidence shows that autonomy leads to increased engagement and creativity and decreases turnover in organizations

(Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Gagné & Deci, 2005). However, these findings tend to marginalize certain contextual elements-such as the modality of the work, organizational culture, and expectations of the roles-that can function as moderators regarding how autonomy affects employee outcomes.

2.2 Perceived Overwork

On the other hand, perceived overwork focuses on the subjective experience of the mental and emotional strain, regardless of the concrete measurement of workload (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). In technology-fueled work settings, workers were burned out with the illusionary psychological pressure that was caused by the imperative to constantly stay connected and be ready to respond (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Mazmanian et al., 2013). Few studies have addressed the relationship between perceived overwork and autonomy, its increasing relevance notwithstanding, especially within agile work arrangements.

2.3 The Flexibility Paradox

The flexibility paradox emerges counter-notion, which is that autonomy is truly a good thing for employee well-being. Flexible working policies promise empowerment, but can self-impose a performance pressure through an inability to disconnect (Chung, 2022). Employees that have more autonomy around their working life find themselves internalizing pressure to always be available, thus exacerbating work intensification (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Nevertheless, these empirical assessments of the paradox remain scarce, particularly with respect to different work modes and demographic groups.

2.4 Synthesis and Gap

The extant literature speaks to the beneficial effects of autonomy and detrimental impacts of overwork. Autonomy contributing toward overwork, especially through flexible work, is scarcely explored, methodologically fragmented, and lacking validated psychometric instruments, diverse sampling of occupations, and thorough exploration of contextual moderators. This study attempts to fill these gaps by quantitatively investigating the autonomy-overwork relation using validated scales in diverse working contexts and roles.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Objectives

- This study targets the exploration of imposed workplace autonomy and perceived overwork of heterogeneous employees in flexible work structures. The key objectives are the following:
- To determine if an increased level of workplace autonomy causes an increase or decrease in perceived overwork.
- To study how demographic and work factors (age, gender, job role, work mode) intrude upon the relationship.

3.2 Research Questions

- What relationship would be formulated between perceived workplace autonomy and perceived overwork in emerging organizational contexts?
- Does perceived overwork tend to increase or decrease with a higher level of autonomy?
- Do age, gender, job role, and work mode DEMOGRAPHIC moderators affect the autonomy-overwork relationship?

3.3 Hypotheses

➢ H_0 (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant relationship between workplace autonomy and perceived overwork.

➢ H_1 (Alternative Hypothesis): There is a significant relationship between workplace autonomy and perceived overwork.

3.4 Research Design and Approach

A quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional correlational design was adopted so as to allow exploration of naturally occurring relationships among variables without being subjected to manipulation. Data were collected at one single time from self-reports from 100 working professionals working in different industries with different kinds of roles and different types of work modes (remote, hybrid, on-site).

3.5 Sampling and Participants

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to select participants with actual experience in flexible or structured work environments. The inclusion criteria ensured that participants represented a variety of job roles and work modes. The ethics clearance was kept up to standard with respect to informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation.

3.6 Measures and Instrumentation

Two of late validated measures were used:

Workplace Autonomy was measured by the Autonomy Subscale of the Work Design Questionnaire (WDQ) (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006), consisting of seven items on a 5-point Likert scale, with scale anchors ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

Perceived Overwork was measured by the Work Overload Subscale of the Job Demands–Resources Questionnaire (JD–R) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), which consisted of five items on a 5-point frequency scale with anchors ranging from Never to Very Often.

Both scales have demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.80$) as well as construct validity in various organizational settings.

3.7 Data Collection and Analysis

The survey was administered online through secure platforms and through professional networks. Only complete responses were considered for analysis. The complete dataset was analyzed using SPSS. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used in testing the main hypothesis whilst subgroup trends were explored descriptively from the entered demographic data.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed of the study's purpose before acceptance. They were assured of their complete anonymity and the confidential processing of the study data. Ethical considerations were guided by the standards set forth for social science research.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Overview of the Analysis

This chapter presents the results of a quantitative study aimed at examining the relationship between perceived workplace autonomy and perceived overwork among professionals across diverse job settings. The analytical process began with thorough data cleaning to ensure quality and completeness, after which the reliability of the instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for the Autonomy Subscale of the Work Design Questionnaire (WDQ) and the Work Overload Subscale of the Job Demands–Resources Questionnaire (JD–R). Descriptive statistics were then used to summarize the central tendencies and variations in the responses given by participants on these constructs. Pearson correlation analysis was next conducted in testing the main hypothesis, analyzing the statistical relationships between autonomy and overwork. Exploratory subgroup analyses were then conducted where deemed necessary to investigate possible impacts of demographic variables such as gender, age group, work mode (remote, hybrid, on-site), and job role. The empirical results presented here shall form the basis of interpretation and discussion carried out in the succeeding chapter.

4.2 Data Cleaning and Preparation

Twenty-seven of the one hundred and twenty-seven survey responses received were discarded due to incompleteness or inconsistency, leaving the analysis sample at a total of 100. Only fully completed questionnaires were considered to ensure statistical validity and to eliminate any potential bias from missing values. Total scores for workplace autonomy and perceived overworked hours were calculated by summing respondents' item scores on each of the subscales (seven for autonomy and five for overwork). The dataset was scrutinized for outliers and gauged for normality. Standardized coding was applied for demographic variables to facilitate subgroup analysis.

4.3 Participant Demographics

An estimated 100 working professionals from different sectors, job roles, and work environments were systematically selected to ensure a broad, inclusive representation. Participants were distributed across gender identities, age brackets, and types of employment (freelance, managerial, non-managerial). Work modes were distributed among remote, hybrid, and on-site arrangements. This demographic spread offered a complete sustainability of understanding from

how perceived autonomy and overwork are manifested in varied workforce profiles. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of demographic information.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 100)

Variable	**Category**	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage(%)**
Gender	Female	39	39.00%
	Male	49	49.00%
	Other	7	7.00%
Age Group	18-24	19	19.00%
	25-34	33	33.00%
	35-44	28	28.00%
	45-54	17	17.00%
	55+	3	3.00%
Job Role	Freelance/Contract-based	16	16.00%

	Managerial	28	28.00%
	Non-managerial	52	52.00%
	Other	4	4.00%
Work Mode	Hybrid	57	57.00%
	On-site	16	16.00%
	Remote	27	27.00%
Functional Area	Creative/Design	14	14.00%
	HR	20	20.00%
	IT/Tech	16	16.00%
	Marketing/Sales	15	15.00%
	Other	19	19.00%

4.4 Reliability Analysis

In the current research, Cronbach alpha (a) was used to test the internal consistency of the measurement instruments, at the subscale level. There were two subscales used:

➢ Work design questionnaire (WDQ; 7 items): Autonomy Subscale.

➢ Work Overload Subscale of the Job Demands Resources Questionnaire (JD -R Q; 5 items). It is traditionally accepted that internal reliability can be proven by a level of Cronbach alpha that is 0.70 or higher (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Both subscales in the current study reached their alpha levels which not only met but even exceeded this requirement, indicating that the items included in each of the scales are reliable measures of a single underlying dimension.

Table 2

Cronbach's Alpha for Workplace Autonomy and Perceived Overwork Subscales

Subscale	**No. of Items**	**Cronbach's Alpha (α)**
Autonomy	7	0.87
Work Overload	5	0.81

4.5 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to examine the central tendencies and dispersion of the two key variables: workplace autonomy and perceived overwork. Composite scores for each variable were created by summing participants' responses across their respective subscale items. The Autonomy Subscale (from the Work Design Questionnaire) included 7 items, while the Work Overload Subscale (from the Job Demands–Resources Questionnaire) consisted of 5 items. Both subscales used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Workplace Autonomy and Perceived Overwork Scores

	Mean (M) Standard Deviation (SD)		**Minimum Maximum Range**
25.08	3.01	15	30

Variable Workplace Autonomy 27 Perceived Overwork 16.44 2.18 1 5 17.5

Note: Composite scores were calculated by summing Likert-scale responses across all relevant items per subscale.

4.6 Correlation Analysis

To examine whether a relationship exists between workplace autonomy and perceived overwork, a Pearson product–moment correlation analysis was conducted. This statistical method is commonly used to assess the strength and direction of linear associations between two continuous variables. In this study, the correlation was calculated using the composite scores derived from the autonomy and work overload subscales.

The hypotheses tested were as follows:

➢ H_0 (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant relationship between workplace autonomy and perceived overwork.

➢ H_1 (Alternative Hypothesis): There is a significant relationship between workplace autonomy and perceived overwork.

Before conducting the correlation, the data were screened for accuracy, normality, and linearity. No major violations were identified. The analysis was performed on a sample of 100 participants, using their total scores on both subscales.

The results of the Pearson correlation are presented in **Table 4** below.

Table 4

Pearson Correlation Between Workplace Autonomy and Perceived Overwork (N = 100)

Variables	**1. Workplace Autonomy**	**2. Perceived Overwork**
1. Workplace Autonomy	—	**r = 0.088**
2. Perceived Overwork	**r = 0.088**	—

Note. $p = 0.387$ (not statistically significant at $p < 0.05$)

Interpretation:

The analysis yielded a very weak, positive correlation between workplace autonomy and perceived overwork ($r = 0.088$, $p = .387$). This correlation is not statistically significant, indicating that there is no meaningful linear relationship between the two variables in the sample.

As a result, the null hypothesis is retained. These findings diverge from prior literature that often reports a negative relationship between autonomy and overload. The absence of a significant correlation in this sample may point to the influence of unmeasured variables or contextual factors, such as organizational culture, role expectations, or industry-specific workload norms

A scatterplot of the two variables is presented in Figure 1. The plot demonstrates a very weak, positive linear relationship, consistent with the computed Pearson correlation value ($r = 0.088$).

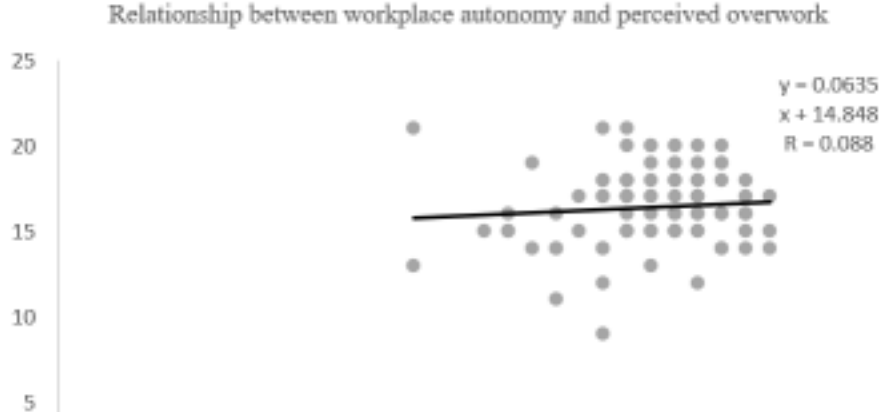

Figure 1: Scatterplot showing the relationship between workplace autonomy and perceived overwork ($r = 0.088$, $p = .387$).

4.7 Summary of Key Research Findings

This chapter presents the statistical data, revealed in a study conducted to verify the relationship between perceived autonomy and perceived overwork. The tools showed high internal consistency. Descriptive statistics showed moderate levels of perceived autonomy and overwork. However, the correlation analysis did not establish a statistically significant relationship between both constructs. Hence, the acceptance of the null hypothesis confirmed that perceived workplace autonomy does not significantly affect perceived overwork within this sample. These findings diverge from some earlier studies, emphasizing the need to examine other variables or contextual influences, which are addressed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

5. Discussion

5.1 Study Summary

This study investigated the interplay between workplace autonomy and perceived overwork by modern professionals. Drawing upon the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model and work design theory, a quantitative correlational approach was adopted. Data from 100 employees, encompassing varied job roles and work modes (remote, hybrid, on-site), were used for the analysis. Composite scores were calculated from two validated instruments: Work Design Questionnaire (WDQ) Autonomy Subscale and JD–R model's Work Overload Subscale. A Pearson correlation analysis was run to test for a significant effect of workplace autonomy on perceived overwork.

5.2 Key Findings and Interpretation

The found results showed a very weak positive correlation between workplace autonomy and perceived overwork ($r = 0.088$, $p = .387$), hence being nonsignificant statistically. So the null hypothesis was accepted, meaning there is no meaningful relationship between the two variables within this sample group. This outcome is in contrast with most of the literature, which often considers autonomy as a buffer to job strain and burnout." One explanation may be found in the "flexibility paradox" (Chung, 2022), which posits that whereas autonomy, in theory, grants control and satisfaction, in practice, especially in hybrid or remote environments, it increases pressures to self-manage and be continuously available. The absence of boundaries in these settings may negate the benefits of autonomy to the detriment of emotional exhaustion. Participants cited moderately high levels of both autonomy and overwork; thus, these data imply that autonomy alone does not necessarily equip those subjected to it to feel unburdened. Other factors, such as expectation of performance, unclear role definition, or lack of management support, might fill the role of perceived overwork.

5.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the findings challenge the rather simplistic assumption of the JD–R model that autonomy by any means mitigates job strain. Instead, autonomy might be contingent on contextual variables, including organizational culture, task complexity, and the presence or absence of role clarity and support systems. Future JD–R models should therefore consider, and in fact distinguish between, the qualitative nature of autonomy; whether it is in scheduling, in decision-making, or in the way tasks are actually carried out, is likely to have profound differences in how they increase or alleviate stress. Practically, some crucial insights are offered to HR managers and consultants. Giving employees autonomy without erecting suitable boundaries or offering supports is likely to actually exacerbate their stress and job pressures. Therefore, organizations should still promote autonomy but do so in a way that includes structuring it with clear expectations, easily accessible guidance, and institutional mechanisms for querying and managing workload. This would be a step toward creating a kind of autonomy that empowers rather than burdens.

6. Conclusion

This study attempted to determine the impact of autonomy in work settings and perceived

overwork in professional occupations within modern organizational conditions. Building from the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model as a theoretical basis, it was subjected to a quantitative-correlational analysis with the application of validated instruments of surveys for the measurement of autonomy and work overload. The principal guiding query was: Are higher levels of workplace autonomy correlated with lower levels of perceived overwork? The correlation derived from the data was very minimal and not statistically significant ($r = 0.088$, $p = .387$). While this result did not support the theorized inverse relation, it provides further discourse for work design by implying that while autonomy is in most cases seen as a job resource that supports the employee, it may not always act in this way when it comes to preventing experiences of overwork. Rather, the inference should be drawn that autonomy in today's work environments-a prime intersection between flexibility and high demands-is much more intricate. Foremost rank among these interpretations is the famous "flexibility paradox"-meaning that increased freedom at work can sometimes enhance stress among the employees due to blurred boundaries, role ambiguities, or internal pressure to perform. This is especially true in hybrid and remote working contexts-the lines between autonomy and self-imposed overextension can often blur.

Further implications of these findings are that while autonomy is highly important, it cannot be viewed as a one-size-fits-all remedy to problems associated with workloads. Hence, organizations need to review the context and quality of autonomy they provide their workers to ensure that it is complemented by clearly defined expectations, accessible resources, and ongoing managerial assistance. It is meant to liberate employees, not either isolate them or weigh them down with excessive self-management. This study does have some limitations: no subgroup inferential analyses, and it takes on a cross-sectional design. However, as far as grounding research goes, it provides valuable groundwork. Further studies could build upon these findings using longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches and explore demographic differences in the autonomy–overwork interaction. In summary, this study sheds proper light on the modern conception of autonomy and its place within evolving work environments. It urges both academic researchers and practitioners to start moving past simplistic cause-and-effect models and towards a more profound, context-related view of autonomy and well-being in the workplace.

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