

Karoshi – What is It and How is It Relevant to Employee Wellness?



We are all aware of the popular adage “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy”. But little did we know that all work and no play can kill Jack! Yes, it’s possible that overworking can lead to serious health hazards, putting you closer to death.

This has been happening in Japan for decades since World War 2, so much so, that the Japanese have coined a term for it – *Karoshi*.

What is Karoshi?

Karoshi literally means death by overwork. The latest victim of this phenomenon was the 31-year-old journalist, Miwa Sado. She reportedly worked overtime for 159 hours in a month, before dying of heart failure in July 2013. Her death was declared as karoshi only in October 2017.

Before that, 24-year-old Matsuri Takahashi logged 105 hours in a month working at a Japanese Ad Agency, Dentsu. Due to work stress, Takahashi committed suicide jumping off the office's roof on Christmas, 2015.

In a bid to rebuild their economy after the fall out during World War 2, Japanese workers began putting their unswerving loyalty to the ultimate test. Due to the enormous work-related stress, sleep deprivation, and no work-life balance, some Japanese workers began committing suicide or suffered strokes, heart failure, or cardiac arrests.

Fast forward to today, this overall picture of work-related stress in Japan is hardly getting any better. According to a 2016 report, in a survey of 10,000 Japanese workers, more than 20% of employees said they worked at least 80 hours of overtime in a month.

In India, with the advent of IT companies, the number of employees working overtime in erratic schedules is gradually increasing. It's really horrifying to see a lot of young employees succumbing to several health ailments and chronic stress because of their heavy workload.

Karoshi in India – Is it for Real?

A study done in 2015 in the journal, Lancet reported that people who work long hours, greater than 55 hours per week, are three times more at risk of suffering from stroke than those logging in standard hours for around 35 to 40 hours a week.

Sadly, the situation in India is not the best. We see several professionals clocking long hours at the office or at home sitting in front of their laptops even after getting back from the office.

A 2016 study, by Manpower Group, found Indian millennials working 52 hours per week, the highest globally. In addition, Indians are also

vacation deprived. Travel website Expedia said 60% of Indians feel that they [don't have time to take off for a vacation](#).

Technology has blurred the schedule of regular working hours. Working from home, taking calls at home, checking your business inbox from the smartphone has become a habit of sorts. Due to the urge of not having a full inbox when you log in the morning, you resort to responding to emails at night, thereby working more and more.

As a result, this has only increased your exposure to the glowing screen. And regular exposure to the blue light screen throughout the day and night releases toxic chemicals that can lead to several eye ailments. Not just eye ailments, but also several lifestyle disorders like high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity are on the rise.

Overworking for a prolonged period of time can lead to burnout and eventually to chronic fatigue syndrome causing short-term memory impairment, muscle cramps, migraine, headache, sleep disturbance, and joint pain.



How to Tackle the ‘Overworking’ Phenomenon?

A proper work-life balance is essential in today’s time. If you don’t realise it today, you will understand its importance in the future because you are answerable for your employees’ well being. Unfortunately, it might not be possible to decrease the number of working hours.

In many companies, unlike manufacturing or factory set-up, production is not a linear function of time spent in the workplace. Partly, the problem arises from the dominant work culture of your organisation. Rather than supporting longer working hours, support employees to work smarter and figure out a way to get things done faster.

Here are some important measures you can incorporate to prevent your employees from working too much:

1. Break a Big Task into Smaller Attainable Goals

Rather than working to complete a big task on hand, encourage employees to focus their efforts better by breaking an enormous task into smaller goals. The feeling of completion of a smaller task and achievable goals will keep them motivated to finish a big daunting task and also ensure that they don’t overwork.

This also makes it easier to measure their productivity each hour or day.

2. Set Boundaries

It is important to acknowledge the boundaries of your employees’ working hours. Encourage employees to give feedback and ask them to indicate clearly the days they are willing to work late and the days they must leave

on time. This will help you assign tasks in accordance, promoting a healthy work-life balance.

3. Turning Off Distractions

Emails, social media, and the smartphone can be major distractions and also get employees more worked up than usual. While it wouldn't be right to ban their use, you can definitely educate your employees about the repercussions of excessive use.

4. Manage Time Effectively

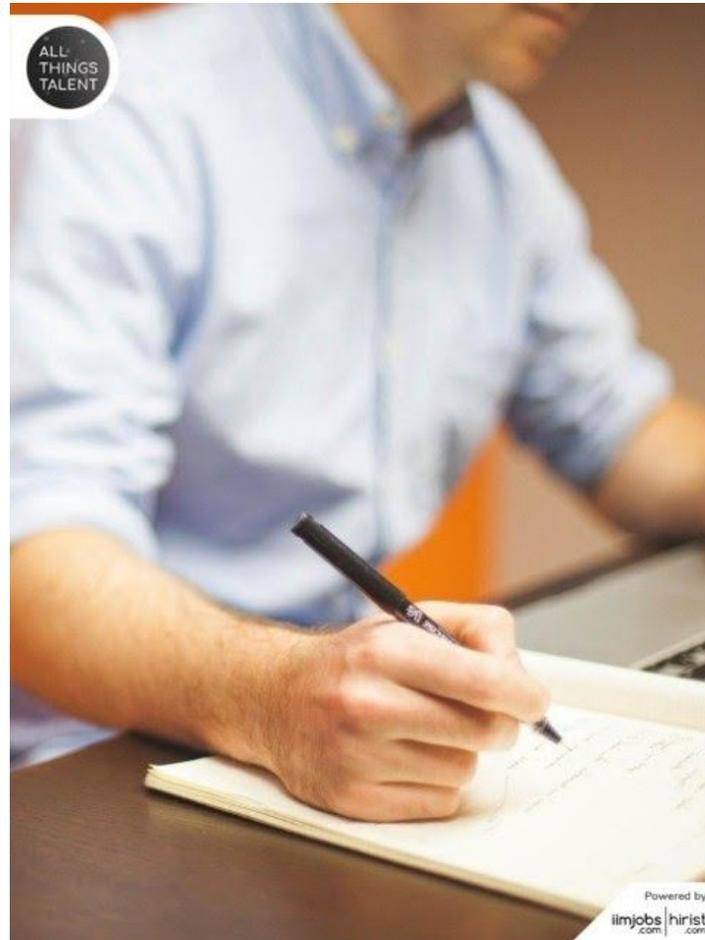
Support your employees by prioritising the more important tasks for the beginning of the workday – this is when they are the most alert and energetic. Save the simple stuff for later, so that they can head home on time. This will also help you extract the maximum productivity out of employees.

5. Embedding Employee Wellbeing

Certain health and wellbeing measures can be embedded as part of the organisational culture. It's worth considering some of the following activities:

- Introducing standing desks or standing meetings.
- 'Deskercise' or encouraging employees to do simple stretches at their desks.
- Explicit policies of break time and provision of appropriate spaces to relax and take a time-out.
- Providing healthy snack options at the canteen to discourage employees from skipping their meals.
- Conducting health sessions like Yoga, Meditation, Zumba, and Nutrition and Wellness workshops.

- Encourage open communication to listen to feedback from employees and act upon their stress, if any.
- Advocate a flexible culture that values efficiency, productivity and innovation over long working hours.
- Providing the right tools and technology for healthy initiatives like offering step counters through smartphone apps or offer guided targets to encourage employee wellbeing.



Bottom-line – Put an End to Karoshi

Instances of people losing their health and worse, life are found throughout the world. While it certainly looks like India is soon following the footsteps of Japan, there's still time to turn the ship around. Make a few small changes that prioritise your employees' well being and soon enough, productivity levels are sure to soar.