



# SOCIAL MENTALITY AND RESEARCHER THINKERS JOURNAL

Open Access Refereed E-Journal & Refereed & Indexed

ISSN: 2630-631X



Social Sciences Indexed

www.smartofjournal.com / editorsmartjournal@gmail.com

December 2018

Article Arrival Date: 18.11.2018 Published Date:13.12.2018 Vol 4 / Issue 14 / pp:1011-1016

## KAROSHI AND OVERWORK

Assistant Prof. Dr. Barış ÖZTUNA

Çankırı Karatekin University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Labor Economics and Industrial Relations, barisoz83@yahoo.com, Çankırı/TURKEY

### ABSTRACT

The Japanese have created many new concepts, including karoshi, which refers to death from overwork. Measures should be taken against karoshi cases, which are common in Japan. Many other countries also have overtime policies, as shown by OECD statistics. However, overtime policies in countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden suggest that lower working times are more beneficial. Employees experience stress due to overwork, which causes heart diseases, cancer, and high blood pressure. This study examines the effects of overwork on employees and overtime work in other countries. It discusses the concepts of overwork and karoshi using Turkish and foreign sources, and statistics from the OECD and the World Economic Forum.

**Keywords:** Karoshi, Overwork, Stress

### 1. INTRODUCTION

With the industrial revolution, employers adopted overwork policies to earn more profits. After the defeat of Japan in World War II, Japanese government have emphasized overwork policies to develop the national economy, believing in the formula of working long hours to overcome economic crises. As in the early years of the industrial revolution, company interests were prioritized.

However today, studies examine the relationship between overwork and productivity. Accordingly, some countries even change their work policies, reducing official work hours. Employees' balance of work and private life has become an important issue in our modern world. Employees expect both governments and companies to increase leisure time. This issue also raises the quality of work life.

This study examines the effects of overwork on employees and overtime work in other countries. It discusses the concepts of overwork and karoshi using Turkish and foreign sources, and statistics from the OECD and the World Economic Forum.

### 2. OVERWORK

Overwork can cause health problems by decreasing sleeping hours. A large number of employees work seated for long periods, which has negative effects on the cardiovascular system and causes weight gain. Overwork also causes stress, adversely affecting employee health (Tuzcu, 2015). Overwork triggers heart diseases, leading to heart attacks and high blood pressure. Working under stress plays a major role in heart disease (HT Hayat, 2012).

A number of health problems are associated with sitting for long periods. Obesity, a metabolic syndrome, leads to high blood pressure, hyperglycemia and abnormal cholesterol levels through excess body fat, especially around the waist. Frequent long-term sitting increases the risk of death due to cardiovascular disease or cancer (Laskowski, 2018). We can observe damages of overwork, examining annual working hours of OECD countries in 2017.

**Table 1:** Annual Work Hours of OECD Countries in 2017

Country	Annual Work Hours
Mexico	2257.4
Costa Rica	2178.9
South Korea	2024.0
Greece	2018.0
Russia	1980.0
Chile	1954.0
Poland	1895.0
Israel	1885.0
Latvia	1875.0

Portugal	1863.0
Estonia	1857.0
Lithuania	1844.0
Turkey	1832.0
USA	1780.0
Czech Republic	1776.0
OECD - Total	1759.0
New Zealand	1753.0
Hungary	1740.4
Ireland	1738.0
Italy	1722.6
Slovakia	1714.0
Japan	1710.0
Canada	1695.0
Spain	1686.5
United Kingdom	1681.0
Australia	1675.9
Slovenia	1655.1
Finland	1628.0
Austria	1613.1
Sweden	1609.0
Switzerland	1570.0
Belgium	1546.0
Luxembourg	1518.0
France	1514.0
Netherlands	1433.0
Norway	1419.1
Denmark	1408.0
Germany	1356.0

Source: OECD, 2018

Overwork policies in South Korea were part of a movement intended to accelerate economic growth. However, concerns about social problems such as low birth rate and slowing productivity forced the government to reduce work hours and give employees the “right to rest.” Although the concept of karoshi refers to death from overwork in Japan, annual work hours in Japan are lower than the average annual work hours in OECD countries (Leach, 2018). Table 2 shows the average weekly work hours of OECD countries.

Table 2: Average Weekly Work Hours in OECD Countries (2010-2017)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Australia	36.3	36.3	36.4	36.2	36.0	36.0	35.8	35.8
Austria	37.7	37.7	37.5	37.1	36.7	36.6	36.5	36.4
Belgium	36.9	36.8	36.9	37.2	37.1	37.1	37.0	37.5
Chile	42.7	42.7	42.7	42.5	42.2	41.9	41.6	41.3
Czech Republic	41.2	41.0	40.8	40.5	40.4	40.4	40.2	40.1
Denmark	33.6	33.7	33.6	33.6	33.5	33.5	32.9	33.2
Estonia	38.7	38.7	38.8	38.8	38.9	38.6	38.4	38.5
Finland	37.3	37.2	37.1	36.9	36.8	36.8	36.7	36.7
France	38.0	38.0	37.9	37.5	37.2	37.2	37.3	37.3
Germany	35.7	35.5	35.5	35.3	35.3	35.2	35.2	35.0
Greece	42.2	42.1	42.0	42.0	41.9	42.2	42.3	42.0
Hungary	39.7	39.4	39.4	39.5	39.8	39.8	39.7	39.8
Iceland	39.1	39.7	39.4	39.6	39.7	39.7	39.4	39.2
Ireland	35.5	34.9	35.0	35.4	35.6	35.9	35.9	36.2
Israel	40.8	40.9	41.1	40.7	40.5	40.6	40.6	40.7
Italy	37.8	37.5	37.1	36.9	36.9	37.0	37.0	37.2
South Korea	45.9	44.6	45.4	43.8	44.6	44.4	43.7	43.4
Latvia	38.8	38.8	38.7	38.8	39.1	39.0	38.7	38.9
Luxembourg	37.2	37.0	37.2	37.1	37.4	37.4	37.5	37.4
Mexico	43.3	43.2	43.1	43.2	43.1	43.2	43.4	43.4
Netherlands	30.6	30.6	30.4	30.0	30.2	30.1	30.3	30.4
New Zealand	37.5	37.4	37.2	37.5	37.4	37.5	37.7	37.7
Norway	34.1	34.1	34.3	34.2	34.4	34.2	34.3	-
Poland	40.6	40.5	40.7	40.7	40.8	40.7	40.7	40.5
Portugal	38.9	39.1	39.1	39.3	39.7	39.4	39.6	39.7
Slovakia	40.6	40.6	40.7	40.7	40.4	40.2	40.0	39.8
Slovenia	39.4	39.5	39.8	39.6	39.3	39.3	39.4	39.2
Spain	38.7	38.5	38.2	38.0	37.9	37.8	37.7	37.7
Sweden	36.3	36.3	36.4	36.3	36.3	36.3	36.4	36.4
Switzerland	35.2	35.2	35.1	35.0	34.7	34.7	34.7	34.6
Turkey	49.3	48.9	48.4	47.9	47.7	47.4	46.8	46.5

United Kingdom	36.4	36.4	36.3	36.5	36.7	36.7	36.7	36.6
OECD Countries	37.8	37.7	37.7	37.5	37.6	37.6	37.5	37.3
Colombia	46.5	46.0	45.7	45.5	45.3	45.0	44.9	44.7
Costa Rica	44.9	45.3	43.7	42.9	42.8	43.3	44.0	43.5
Lithuania	38.6	38.3	38.3	38.4	38.4	38.6	38.5	38.5
Brazil	-	39.7	39.5	39.2	38.9	38.2	-	-
South Africa	44.5	44.5	44.2	44.0	43.8	43.7	43.6	43.5

Source: OECD, 2018

In 2017, Turkey had the highest average weekly work hours among OECD countries, followed by Colombia, South Africa, Costa Rica, South Korea and Mexico. In Europe, Greece and Poland are the two countries with the highest weekly work hours. Canadian and US data were not disclosed in 2017. Despite the 48-hour weekly limit in the United Kingdom, its citizens work less than 37 hours on average. German people have relatively lower weekly work hours. However, it has been recognized as one of the most competitive countries in the world since 2015 (Lockhart, 2015). Table 3 shows the world’s 10 most competitive countries in 2015.

Table 3: The 10 Most Competitive Countries in 2015

Degree	Country	Value
1	Switzerland	5.8
2	Singapore	5.7
3	USA	5.6
4	Germany	5.5
5	Netherlands	5.5
6	Japan	5.5
7	Hong Kong	5.5
8	Finland	5.5
9	Sweden	5.4
10	United Kingdom	5.4
Degree	Country	Value

Source: World Economic Forum, 2015

The Global Competitiveness Report, originally developed by Klaus Schwab, has been calculated since 1979, taking into account countries’ training and skills development, employment and employee compensation, asset creation and entrepreneurship, financial intermediation of real economy investments, corruption and rent, basic services and infrastructure, and financial transfers (World Economic Forum, 2015: 4).

Switzerland ranked first in the 2015 Global Competitiveness Report. Its weekly work hours are lower than those of other countries. The nation’s first-class innovation levels, among other things, attach importance to protection for employees and flexible work hours (Lockhart, 2015).

More than half of Dutch workers work part time, a much larger percentage than other developed countries, but the Netherlands is consistently one of the happiest countries in the world. In 2014, on average, only one-fifth of the working population in the EU (8.7% of men and 32% of women) had part-time jobs. However, 26.8% of males and 76.6% of females in the Netherlands work less than 36 hours per week (Luxton, 2016), because Dutch women have relatively more difficult access to the labor market. Compared to other countries, fewer Dutch men had to fight in the world wars of the twentieth century. As a result, women did not work in factories like they did in US and Britain, where both parents did not need to work for a comfortable life thanks to their wealth (The Economist, 2015). In Sweden, a pilot study was carried out to reduce work hours from public hospitals to private enterprises, in order to increase productivity and make employees happier. Sweden ranks ninth in an index of the most competitive countries in the world, according to a new report by the World Economic Forum, which gives high scores for good employer-worker relations and efficient use of employees (Lockhart, 2015).

### 3. KAROSHI

In our modern world, as many things change, Japanese culture is also changing. If the difference between generations can lead to a cultural change, then Japan also can shift away from its characteristics such as traditional collectivism, interdependence, superior-subordinate relationships,

empathy, sensitivity and sacrifices towards a social structure with individuality, autonomy, aggression and self-proving schemes (Lebra, 2013: 288). This strategy, which has created useless employers and managers because of life-long employment guarantees, has served well for both Japan and its people. However, it is economically difficult to pursue this employment path. Many Japanese companies require employees to work on weekends and late into the night instead of a large number of layoffs; however, over time this employment strategy leading to *karoshi* has gradually been adopted by fewer employers. Some Japanese employers were harassing employees through *ijime* (bullying), hoping that they would eventually leave the company. However, some hidden social costs due to *karoshi* and *ijime* legal cases have started to emerge. Due to the emergence of such social problems, the ability of Japanese people and their economic system to follow the traditions that prevailed in the past has been in serious doubt. The comprehensive system of social welfare financed by the public sector is becoming more conspicuous, especially in times of economic crisis (Meek, 2004: 327-328).

Today, the term, *karoshi*, is used not only in Japan, but also in developed capitalist countries, like *kanban* (a scheduling system for lean manufacturing and just-in-time manufacturing), *keiretsu* (companies with interlocking business relationships and shareholdings), *nemawashi* (laying the foundation for a change or project by communicating with the stakeholders) and *kaizen* (continuous improvement). *Karoshi* describes the workaholicism of Japanese people. Although there are no official government statistics about *karoshi* in Japan, the word is widely used by the lawyers victims consult on the *Karoshi Helpline Network* established in 1988. Each year, about 10,000 workers become victims of *karoshi*, a figure close to the annual number of deaths due to motor vehicle accidents in Japan (Kato, 1994: 44). A healthy business life and lifestyle is important to avoid *karoshi*. *Karoshi* is not only a medical problem, but also a social problem. A collaborative and integrated effort by government, employers and employees is necessary to reduce work stress and prevent *karoshi* (Ke, 2012: 58).

Japanese culture has valued overwork for more than a century. After the Meiji restoration in 1868, the Japanese had to increase the country's industrial power to the level of the Western powers. However, the monumental success of the transformation from a feudal society to a fully industrialized nation in just a few decades required a great deal of labor power. Japan has achieved a similar success in the post-war period and has made great efforts to put behind their World War II defeat and increase its economic power to the level of Western economies. In this last period, excessive overtime has been a central aspect of Japanese business life, making overwork an integral part of Japanese economic life for a century and a half. Later, companies' greedy profit-seeking activities and workplace environments that neglect employees' personal needs affected their overwork policies. This approach has forced Japanese companies to ignore the basic principles of human rights guaranteed under the Japanese post-war constitution (Hiroshi, 2017). Like many Asian countries, Japan has weak labor unions. Employees have little bargaining power concerning overtime pay. Laws and regulations need to be revised to give employees more freedom in these matters. In addition to compensation, fines and relevant law amendments should be introduced to discourage *karoshi* cases and to encourage companies to create healthier and more comfortable work environments (Asgari et al., 2016: 69-70).

In Japan, employee salaries depend on performance. Japanese companies try to create competition between workers. Since 1992, employees have had problems with overwork and frequently unpaid overtime pay. This type of work also increases employees' workload. Since work hours are criteria for work performance evaluation, employees work overtime for free to satisfy their bosses (North and Morioka, 2016: 65-66). In 1992, the Ministry of Labor in Japan issued these guidelines for creating comfortable work environments (Takashi, 2011):

- Work environments must be properly maintained with comfortable conditions.
- Work conditions should be improved to reduce employees' workload.

- Facilities should be provided for the welfare of employees who must be relieved of fatigue.
- Low-interest loans and grants should be provided to small and medium-sized enterprises in order to encourage them to create comfortable work environments and to improve workplaces.

Here are the measures for karoshi prevention (ILO, 2013):

- To reduce office hours and overwork, it is necessary to reduce work hours, prevent working until late at night, and reduce excessive workload.
- To provide adequate medical support and treatment, companies, families and society should all try to increase the level of medical support and access to appropriate medical facilities and counseling mechanisms in order to prevent karoshi and karojisatsu (suicide due to work stress). Surveys of workers' suicides suggest that most people commit suicide as a result of depression.
- To design healthy and efficient work procedures and workplaces, it is necessary to promote active and effective dialogue between employees and employers. Regular occupational health and safety committee activities or risk assessment activities jointly implemented by employers and workers can reduce the risk of overwork and work-related stress.

There is still little evidence that overwork causes sudden deaths. More studies are needed to clarify the causal relationship. Work hours should be reduced to prevent karoshi. The Japanese national occupational health policy is focused on occupational hazards and employee health services. The psychological work environment should be made more comfortable. Health examinations and health promotion programs should be organized and include all employees. These activities will prevent karoshi and reduce stress (Takashi, 2011).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The problem of overwork, which emerged with the industrial revolution, continued with the economic crisis in 1980. The concept of karoshi illustrates its negative effects. Cases of karoshi have increased in Japan because overwork is considered normal in Japanese society. Overwork negatively affects employee health.

Today, overtime policies in countries such as the Netherlands and Switzerland, which are among the world's most competitive countries according to the Global Competitiveness Report, suggest that lower work times are more beneficial for employee productivity. Although it has annual work hours lower than many other countries, Germany has good productivity. Despite their high annual work hours, Turkey, Colombia and Greece are not as productive as Germany.

Sweden reduced work hours after performing a pilot study in which employees were observed to be more productive and happier. The balance of work and private life has become an important issue for employees in today's world.

Part-time work is common in countries such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, which are among the ten most competitive countries according to the Global Competitiveness Report. Healthy and happy employees contribute to company performance, increasing company profit and productivity.

#### REFERENCES

Asgari, Behrooz, Pickar, Peter, Garay, Victoria (2016). Karoshi and Karou-jisatsu in Japan: causes, statistics and prevention mechanisms. *Asia Pacific Business & Economics Perspectives.*, 4(2), 49-72.

Hiroshi, Kawahito (2017). Confronting "Karōshi": Actions to Prevent Death from Overwork. <https://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00310/>

- HT Hayat (2012). Çok Çalışmanın Sağlığınız Açısından 7 Zararı! <https://hthayat.haberturk.com/saglik/haber/1003629-cok-calismanin-sagliginiz-acisindan-7-zarari>
- ILO (2013). Case Study: Karoshi: Death from Overwork. [https://www.ilo.org/safework/info/publications/WCMS\\_211571/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/safework/info/publications/WCMS_211571/lang-en/index.htm)
- Kato, Tetsuro (1994). The Political Economy of Japanese “Karoshi” (Death from Overwork). *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies*, 26 (2), 41-54.
- Ke, Shin, Der (2012). Overwork, Stroke, and Karoshi-Death from Overwork. *Acta Neurologica Taiwanica*, 21(2), 54-59.
- Laskowski, R., Edward. (2018). What Are the Risks of Sitting Too Much? <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/expert-answers/sitting/faq-20058005>
- Leach, Whitney (2018). This Is Where People Work The Longest Hours. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/01/the-countries-where-people-work-the-longest-hours>
- Lebra, Sugiyama, Takie (2013). Japonlar ve Davranış Biçimleri (çev. Oğuz Baykara). İstanbul: Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Yayınevi.
- Lockhart, Bruce, Anna (2015). Which Countries Work the Shortest Hours – Yet Still Prosper? <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/10/which-countries-work-the-shortest-hours-yet-still-prosper/>
- Lockhart, Bruce, Anna (2015). Which European Countries Work the Longest Hours? <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/06/which-european-countries-work-the-longest-hours>
- Luxton, Emma (2016). Is Part-Time Working the Key to Happiness? <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/04/would-working-less-make-you-happier/>
- Meek, B., Christopher (2004). The Dark Side of Japanese Management in the 1990s: Karoshi and Ijime in the Japanese Workplace. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 19 (3), 312-331.
- North, Scott, Morioka, Rika (2016). Hope Found in Lives Lost: Karoshi and the Pursuit of Worker Rights in Japan. *DE GRUYTER Contemporary Japan*, 28(1), 59-80.
- OECD (2018). Hours Worked. <https://data.oecd.org/emp/hours-worked.htm>**
- OECD (2018). Average Usual Weekly Hours Worked on the Main Job. <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?DataSetCode=ANHRS>
- Takashi, Haratani (2011). Karoshi: Death from Overwork. <http://www.iloencyclopaedia.org/part-i-47946/mental-health/mood-and-affect/mood/karoshi-death-from-overwork>
- The Economist (2015). Why so many Dutch People Work Part Time. <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2015/05/11/why-so-many-dutch-people-work-part-time>
- Tuzcu, Murat, E. (2015). Çalışmanın çoğu zarar! <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/yazarlar/prof.-dr.-e.-murat-tuzcu/calismanin-cogu-zarar--2109815/>
- World Economic Forum (2015). The Global Competitiveness Report 2015–2016. [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/gcr/2015-2016/Global\\_Competitiveness\\_Report\\_2015-2016.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/gcr/2015-2016/Global_Competitiveness_Report_2015-2016.pdf)