Techno-Stress and Psychological Detachment in Workload and Well-Being

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Psychological detachment is a protective factor to cope with excessive job demands. It refers to the ability to psychologically disengage from work when away from the workplace to recover depleted resources. A high workload can hinder psychological detachment, especially in high autonomy and flexibility conditions, forcing workers to remain mentally tied to work.

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1. Introduction

Organizations need to be increasingly “fast” to be efficient globally. The introduction of new technologies and the increase in competitiveness represent a constant challenge affecting workers’ lives and well-being (Paškvan and Kubicek 2017). People’s well-being is a social resource linked to general human progress (Delhey et al. 2018). In the workplace, well-being is represented by the subjective assessment that one’s work generates satisfaction (Maddux 2018), and it is considered one of the central aspects of subjective well-being. Subjective well-being (SWB) at work can be considered a protective factor of employees’ physical and mental health (Mondo et al. 2023; Sahai and Mahapatra 2020) and can prevent turnover intentions (Mondo et al. 2022). It is present when workers have positive emotions that outweigh the negative ones when they perceive high levels of satisfaction, and in turn, they are more performing (De Simone et al. 2022; Taris and Schaufeli 2015). In literature, subjective well-being at work is associated with numerous constructs that can predict and positively impact it (i.e., Babic et al. 2020; Bobbio et al. 2022; Garg and Singh 2020; Kumar 2020; Lee et al. 2021). However, other situations may adversely affect subjective well-being and negatively impact it, especially when workers need to adapt to new situations that they have never experienced before (Bellini et al. 2022a, 2022b, 2023).

The pandemic from COVID-19 was a sudden event that impacted the lives of millions of workers worldwide, bringing profound changes and innovations to which organizations and individuals have had to adapt (Barbieri et al. 2021a; Coulombe et al. 2020; De Simone et al. 2021; Mondo et al. 2021; De Vincenzi et al. 2022; Kniffin et al. 2021).

2. Techno-Stress and Psychological Detachment in Workload and Well-Being

2.1. The Positive Effects of Workload on Technostress and Their Impact on Well-Being

Generally, workload refers to workers' perception of their work experience regarding pace and volume. The concept includes the uncertainty of completing the work on time and in the usual manner (Spector and Jex 1998b), "an all-encompassing term that includes any variable that reflects the amount or difficulty of one's work" (Bowling and Kirkendall 2012, p. 222).

Workload is considered a job demand that can affect workers' responsiveness, i.e., the resources they perceive and can use to meet these demands. A high workload does not necessarily involve stress; workloads and stress are different concepts, which can be related if the workload is perceived as overlapping.

However, Bowling et al. (2015) highlighted how the workload is positively associated with perceived stress and how this correlation brings consequences at the level of well-being (Barbieri et al. 2021b; Hernandez et al. 2021; Nguyen and Tuan 2022; Pace et al. 2021; Schaufeli and Taris 2014). Zappalà et al. (2022) identified a negative impact of the workload on well-being in a homeworkers sample. Aalto et al. (2018) achieved the same results in a sample of physicians, and they found that workload was negatively associated with well-being. Angioha et al. (2020) underlined that the workload negatively and significantly impacts the well-being of a sample of civil servants. Sadiq (2022) found that workload causes work–family conflict, job stress, and job dissatisfaction. Finally, Zinke et al. (2023) highlight how ICT workload has detrimental effects on well-being, as already noted by Barber and Santuzzi (2015) and Day et al. (2010).

Castillo et al. (2020) highlighted a positive relationship between workload and technostress in an interesting review that considers both workers in the field of technology and employees in organizations that use technology only as a tool. Effiyanti and Sagala (2018) affirmed that workload could influence technostress in a sample of teachers called to use ITC tools. Other studies have also highlighted the positive relationship between workload and techno-stress in a sample of workers subjected to increased use of technologies (Christian et al. 2020; Molino et al. 2020b; Spagnoli et al. 2020). The same results were obtained in the research by Melin et al. (2014) and by Suharti and Susanto (2014), in which workload increased techno-stress in samples composed of teachers and employees.

Salanova et al. (2014) and Atanasoff and Venable (2017) highlighted how technostress impacts workers' health and overall well-being and tends to increase the stress already present. Estrada-Muñoz et al. (2021) affirmed that technostress is a "dark side" of ICT, a factor deteriorating well-being, and Wu et al. (2022) obtained the same results: techno-stress negatively affects employee well-being and performance in a sample of employees in smart hotels. Hang et al. (2022) have shown how technological overload, technological invasion, and technological complexity negatively affected the well-being of employees in a sample of banking employees. Finally, Hurbean et al. (2022) analyzed the relationship between techno-stress and well-being in a sample of employees in smart working, detecting how the former can negatively impact the latter. The same results were obtained by Wang et al. (2023) in a sample of employees from three manufacturing companies in China.

2.2. The Positive Effect of Psychological Detachment on Resource Restoration and Well-Being and Its Moderating Role between Job Demands and Negative Work Outcomes

Technology allows people to stay connected and have up-to-date information at all times. This possibility has positive aspects, allowing them to solve real-life problems. However, this constant connection can have several disadvantages and impact on work and well-being. According to some studies in literature, psychological detachment (i.e., the ability and strategy to psychologically disengage from work) facilitates the process of resource restoration (Sonnentag 2011; Sonnentag and Bayer 2005; Sonnentag and Fritz 2015) and promotes well-being (Fritz et al. 2010; Sonnentag et al. 2017; Sonnentag 2018b); also, psychological detachment allows the recovery of a perceived technological overload (Sandoval-Reyes et al. 2019).

Specifically, psychological detachment is considered the most effective individual strategy in the recovery process, able to repair the negative strain effects (Sonnentag and Natter 2004), to reduce fatigue in times of increased stress (Sonnentag and Bayer 2005) and to promote higher levels of well-being (Sonnentag and Fritz 2007, 2015).

Psychological detachment is a protective factor to mitigate the harmful effects of a society in which constant connectivity is the new norm (Sonnentag and Fritz 2015). The mediating role of psychological detachment was demonstrated in previous research: the employees who managed to break away from work experienced higher levels of well-being (Sonnentag and Fritz 2007, 2015) and achieved better performance (Binnewies et al. 2010). While his role as moderator is still partly controversial, according to the meta-analysis by Wendsche and Lohmann-Haislah (2017), the moderating role of psychological detachment on the relationships between job demands and job outcomes is unclear. The study by Allen et al. (2015) also revealed an inconsistent role of psychological detachment as a moderator in the relationship between work-related stress and well-being. Conversely, other studies have shown that psychological detachment can mediate the investigated relationships (Sonnentag 2018a). Sonnentag et al. (2013) revealed that psychological detachment from work moderated the negative relationship between relational conflict and well-being in a white-collar sample. Lu and Chou (2020) underlined that psychological detachment moderates the effects of working hours on work engagement and work performance in a sample of employees working in diverse industries. In particular, psychological detachment attenuates the effects of the negative relationship between working time, work commitment, and work performance. In longitudinal research, Moreno-Jiménez et al. (2009) highlighted that psychological detachment moderates the relationship between role conflict and workplace bullying and between bullying and psychological strain in a sample of employees of three telecommunications companies. Finally, Cooper and Lu (2019) proposed the moderating role of psychological detachment in the recovery/rebuild process of resources in a condition of excessive availability for work.

Information and communication technologies (ICT) are now fundamental tools for work. These tools can bring benefits to work processes, but they can also be potentially harmful to workers. They can be considered a “new” demand that represents a workload due to the massive use of technologies. Such overload can generate a stress

response due to technologies that can be mitigated by protective factors that allow individuals to mentally "disconnect" from work when not in the office.

In conclusion, what emerges from the research is the importance of psychological detachment in mitigating the effects of a high workload, linked to high use of ITC, on the perception of no longer having boundaries between work and private life and the consequent positive impact on well-being. From the point of view of theoretical advancement, the mediating role of technostress between the particular form of workload in smart working and well-being is interesting.

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