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**Chinese HRM:
the influence of working
hours on company's
organization**

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Andrea Pontiggia

Assistant supervisor

Ch. Prof. Renzo Riccardo Cavalieri

Graduand

Carlotta De Stasio

Matricola 885310

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前言

这项研究的基础是分析中国公司内部的人力资源管理，特别关注工作时长问题以及它们如何影响整个商业组织。

有多个方面导致了中国人力资源管理文化的特点，所有这些都有助于将其与其他国家的人力资源管理文化进行一定程度的区分。可以确定的第一个主要方面是近年来中国经济体系的指数式增长：如今，随着这一趋势，企业正在成为经济发展的主力军，并日益获得重要性。此外，中国经济体系在过去两年中发生的变化以及新冠疫情时期带来的停滞和不确定性也非常重要。在这种情况下，许多公司在既在营业额方面、也在劳动力方面受到影响，现有的劳动力负担加重，必须弥补必要数量工人的空缺和经济衰退的影响，争取迅速恢复到疫情前状态，同时跟上来自世界其他地区的巨大需求。所有这一切往往会导致工作强度增加和工作时间延长。

公司内部环境确实会影响员工的感受，无论是在工作时还是在私人生活中。如果劳动者在自己的工作环境中感觉不好，感到有压力，没有必要的私人时间，他们肯定不会发挥出最佳水平。但由于人是公司最主要和最重要的资源，这将最终决定企业的成功或失败。

事实上，本研究特别关注在现代中国企业中日益蔓延的职业倦怠现象，以及作为当代中国社会特征的社会文化现象：996。

在中国的许多公司中，特别是那些属于科技行业的公司，员工的工作时间往往远远超过法律规定的时间。在中国的许多工作场所，公司文化促使员工每周工作 70 个小时，而且这些额外的时间往往是无偿的。

在这种情况下，中国的文化背景也非常重要，它影响了中国的工作和社会制度，导致了目前的工作行为。为此，我分析了不同的社会文化时期，以帮助我更好地解释中国的人力资源管理如何运作，以及为什么。

此外，我也觉得有必要与美国和欧洲的人力资源管理体系进行比较，以了解其中的异同，并从不同的角度来看待这一现象。

在阅读了关于这个问题的研究报告后，我决定进行一次调查，以便更具体地了解工作时间表是如何影响工人的个人生活的，从而影响公司的活力。这个结果是我研究的一个基本转折点。

本论文分为以下四章：

- 第一章通过一个通用的框架，定义了公司内部人力资源的重要性，重点是工作环境对人们生活的影响，包括积极和消极的方面。
- 第二章着重于 996 的话题，提出了一个案例研究，以更好地理解这个问题，并对文化背景进行了分析。
- 第三章研究了上述调查，解释了所使用的结构、调查对象和目标以及调查的目的。此外，为了获得全面的分析，与其他商业实体，如美国和欧洲的公司进行比较是有用的。
- 最后，第四章概述了从问卷调查的结果中得出的结论，与这里分析的研究进行比较。

这种比较将对所研究的主题进行最后的概述，通过许多不同的步骤，引出对中国人力资源管理体系更深入的理解。

Introduction

The basis of this study is the analysis of HRM within Chinese companies, with a particular focus on the issue of working hours and how they influence the entire business organization.

The motivations for investigating this topic are twofold. While on the one hand the interest in Chinese culture and civilization has influenced and distinguished my academic career, on the other hand it has allowed me to deepen the issues concerning HRM in the area.

For the drafting of the first chapter in particular, and as a reference for the subsequent chapters, I took as a basis my work experience in the field, which gave me the necessary tools to fully understand the subject and touch upon what happens within the Human Resources department and in general within a very large and articulated corporate structure.

I therefore developed a passion for the topic covered, perceiving its importance in its minutest details: from the recruiting and placement phases, the retaining and caring for employees, to the entire functioning of departments and the company structure and the achievement of objectives.

There are multiple aspects that have led to the characterization of the culture of Human Resource Management in China, and all of them have helped to differentiate it somewhat from that of other countries.

It is precisely this diversity that has made it interesting for me to study and analyse the field in order to better understand specific labour and social dynamics that have developed within this great territory.

The first and main aspect that can be identified is the exponential growth, in recent years, of the Chinese economic system: nowadays, following this wave, firms are becoming its workhorse and are increasingly gaining importance. Moreover, a great relevance is covered by the changes occurred in the Chinese economic system in the past two years and its stagnation and uncertainty deriving from the pandemic period. In this scenario, many companies are suffering in terms of turnover, but also in terms of workforce, burdening the still existing workforce, which has to make up for the lack of a necessary number of workers and for the economic downturn by aiming for a quick recovery, while keeping up with the great demand coming from the rest of the world. All this tends to result in increased work intensity and longer working hours.

As said before, the issue of long working hours and work intensity have a strong impact on the business organization, but it is mainly a consequence of the influence these aspects have on employee's lives.

The environment people find inside a company really affect how they feel, both while working and

in their private lives. If the human resources do not feel well in their own working environment, feeling under pressure and not having the necessary personal time, they will certainly not perform at their best. But because people are the main and most important resource of a company, this will ultimately determine the success or failure of the business.

Indeed, this study puts a particular focus on the burnout phenomenon, that is increasingly spreading in modern Chinese firms, and on a sociocultural phenomenon that characterizes the contemporary Chinese society: the 996.

In many of the country's companies, above all those who belong to the tech sector, employees often work far longer than the hours required by the law. In many workplaces in China, the company culture has pushed employees to work 70 hours per week, and often the extra hours are unpaid.

In this scenario, a great importance is also covered by the Chinese cultural background, that has influenced its working and social system and led to the current working behaviour. For this reason, indeed, I have analysed different sociocultural eras that helped me better explain how the Chinese HRM works, and why.

Moreover, I have also felt the need to make a comparison with the HRM system in USA and Europe, as to identify the difference and similarities and look at the phenomenon from different perspective. After reading up on the studies conducted on this subject, I decided to carry out a survey in order to understand more specifically how work schedules impact workers' personal lives, and consequently the company dynamics. The result represented a fundamental turning point for my research.

The thesis is divided into 4 chapters, as follows:

The first chapter defines, through a generic framework, the importance of the human resource within the company, focusing on the impact that the work environment has on people's lives, both a positive and negative one. A particular analysis is done on the overworking issue and all the consequences it has on a person's life, including mental and physical ones, referring also to general working policies. The second chapter focuses on the topic of 996 and presents a case study to better understand the matter. To explain this phenomenon, I presented an analysis of China's cultural landscape and the process that has led to the development of certain trends in the social and work environment, which is useful and fundamental for understanding the current situation. In this chapter, different eras are identified, therefore it goes through several steps and social dynamics.

The third chapter introduces the aforementioned survey and its purpose. In addition, to obtain a comprehensive analysis, it was useful to implement a comparison with other business realities, such as American and European, thus tracing the most popular working trends.

Finally, the fourth chapter deeply explains the survey, the structure used, the audience and target to which it is addressed. Indeed, the form have been structured taking into account the articles and

studies read for my analysis, in order to outline the main and most important points regarding the topic. Therefore, all questions have a particular goal and importance. Furthermore, it outlines the conclusions that emerged from the results of the questionnaire compared with the studies analysed here. This comparison will give a final overview on the topic examined, going through many different steps that lead to a deeper understanding of the Chinese HRM system.

In conclusion, as I consider the subject of this thesis of great topicality and relevance, it was important to me to analyse it on several fronts: cultural, historical, social, legal and comparative, finally collecting direct responses from the audience under consideration to have a more real and reliable picture of it. Through this, I have been able to identify and explore key issues that characterize corporate culture and human resource management in one of the most exposed countries in the global labour landscape at the moment.

CHAPTER 1

The human resource and the working environment

People have always been the most important resource of a company, the true competitive advantage of it. Inside every firm, technologies might change, systems might change, even the structure, the objective and plans change, but what is and stays on the basis of everything are people.

When we talk about managing a company, we talk about managing people; for the business, indeed, effective management of human resources is increasingly becoming a primary objective, from the training process to the on boarding process till the everyday care and improvement.

People make the difference in every organization, and will ultimately determine the success or failure of the business, that is constantly linked to correct management of both the capital variable and the man variable. The human factor has therefore become the main resource, and its value is increasingly linked to the quality of the organization and business. It is one of the most important competitive tools on which company results depend.

Today, technology is no longer the only and main factor of competitive differentiation: this difference is now represented by the presence of people and the specific characteristics of the individual in relation to the group, mainly skills and attitude.

Human resources are the way organizations transform informational and physical resources into products or services, so the value the company releases. People are capable of generating ideas, solving problems, making decisions, generating and retaining knowhow that improve the organization from time to time. Precisely because of the central role played by employees within a firm, it is necessary for them to be actively involved in various aspects of company life, thus giving them the opportunity to contribute with their own added value. Involvement and motivation are indispensable for creating a positive climate that certainly makes the work of the individual and also that of the entire company more productive.

1.1 Understanding people's management

Human resource management (HRM) is the process of employing people, training them, compensating them, developing related policies, and developing strategies to retain them. As a field, HRM has undergone many changes over the last thirty years, giving it an even more important role in today's organizations. In the past, HRM mainly meant processing payroll, arranging company

outings, and controlling forms were filled out in the right way, in other words, more of an administrative role rather than a strategic one, that nowadays is crucial to the success of the organization¹. The choice of people is as important as its organisation; it is important to know how to search for, recruit, motivate, involve and enhance human resources.

All these activities are regulated by general directives, and those involved in human resources management have guidelines to follow that are mainly based on the regulations of the country in which the company is located, but the *modus operandi* and attitude is largely derived from the corporate culture, and so is the management that derives from it, with the consequent internal organization mode and structure.

Indeed, compliance with general directives is necessary for setting up a correct organization of work in every country, but to meet the needs of both business and employees, it is not enough to follow the regulations. In fact, to ensure the best work efficiency, it is necessary to assign the resources with the most suitable skills to the various activities, end whenever needed, to reassign them: obviously, in order to achieve appreciable results, this scheduling activity requires certain time and resources, and a correct and careful management².

Therefore, to streamline this workload, shorten schedules and rationalize shifts, it is good to adopt shift scheduling, which can provide the right solutions to the internal and external parties in the time management process.

This is exactly the role covered by the Human Resource department of a company: directives and regulations give the basis for the organizations, but as all companies are different from each other and have different needs according to the structure and the objective, it is really important to structure the management in line with these differences. Finding the right solution for the organizational structure is the main step to run a good management and meet the enterprises' goal: it means to allocate the best resources in the position that better fits them and giving them the tasks that best suit their role and position. But this is just a small part of the HRM. The role and tasks need to be thought taking into account certain working schedules and timing, otherwise there is a great risk of turning in overworking and too high workload.

In order to manage and regulate roles, tasks and working schedules, the role of human resources is crucial for the development of people within the working environment. Human resources management is what holds up the corporate structure and enables its continuous growth.

¹ Anon., *Human Resource Management*, University of Minnesota, 2016, pp. 10.

² M. Boriani, *Gestione del Personale: aumentare l'efficienza aziendale significa anche migliorare l'organizzazione dei turni di lavoro*, Azienda Digitale, www.azienda-digitale.it/gestione-del-personale/aumentare-lefficienza-aziendale-significa-anche-migliorare-lorganizzazione-dei-turni-di-lavoro, Accessed 10 Dec. 2022.

The success of a company, therefore, depends above all on the organisation of people and the strategies to generate a strong sense of stability, unity and motivation in employees. Human resources must be organised, establishing tasks and responsibilities, so that planned goals can be easily achieved. The success of a business is due to the collaboration of internal resources, which have as a common factor the business idea or service that is to be pursued in order to profit from it. An inadequate organisation of Human Resources could therefore slow down or limit the success and development of the entire enterprise.

1.2 The development of human resource management

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, human resource management has undergone many changes in recent years, mainly due to new business and market requirements, but also to the needs of employees.

In today's market, for several years now, companies wishing to increase the possibility of retention and growth must commit to Strategic HR Management as a fundamental driver and not as an “occasional and additional modality”. Organizations in which this culture and these methods are found, present general improvements, increased competitiveness, reduced personnel turnover, improved personnel climate, reduced indirect personnel costs and, in general, greater benefits on all processes.

Considering personnel as an investment and a resource instead of only as a cost is the first indispensable step, a mentality that must be 'naturally present' in ownership and/or management³.

An important change in the field of HRM occurred in recent years: business process techniques are being developed to help empower and involve employees, such as Empowerment and Business Process Re-engineering.

Empowerment is a business reorganization process that aims to empower staff. In environments that are so prone to development and change, empowerment enables the creation of a mechanism capable of responding promptly to business change requirements imposed by the market and the economic environment. Employees empowerment makes every single employee, at all levels of the organization, feel responsible for their actions and aware of their position, and thus, having the authority to make decisions related to their tasks, every detail is managed in a more precise and timely manner.

³ Ebcconsulting , *Strategic Human Resource Management*, www.ebcconsulting.com/gestione-strategica-delle-risorse-umane-strategic-human-resources-management.html, Accessed 14 Feb. 2023.

Empowerment, in this way, allows power to be decentralized and enables everyone to access the information and tools necessary to perform their role, making people more independent. This often also allows for greater expression within the company and helps employees, even those not on the front lines, to make decisions regarding their own tasks. Sometimes it is precisely the lack of decentralization of power and little employee involvement that is the cause of the backwardness of many companies. Obviously, the use of this technique and its development requires time and aptitude of all participants, who must be inclined to progress in their role and take more responsibility.

Empowerment therefore automatically puts the individual employee in a higher position, and for this reason requires greater incentive and rewards. As a result, performance and creativity levels are raised and motivation is increased, decreasing internal conflicts and ensuring more effective decision-making. All this certainly benefits the corporate organization and leads to better and faster achievement of objectives.

The empowerment technique goes hand in hand with business process re-engineering, which focuses on re-engineering in view of short-term or long-term business changes, requiring the involvement and empowerment of all personnel⁴.

Business process reengineering (BPR) is the complete overhaul of existing core business processes in order to improve outputs such as profits, product quality, costs, or speed. BPR is an extremely involved process that requires buy-in from the entire organization, precise planning, and a dedicated team to move forward⁵.

As said above, these techniques and kind of approach help improving the entire working environment, giving the employees the possibility to have a better feeling towards their job and therefore performing at their best. Not only, but by giving people the chance to make decision and be more autonomous, they also have the possibility to readjust their working schedule and timing. That does not mean to just be result oriented and to work less hours than required, but means respecting certain working routines and having a good work-life balance, that is not taken for granted in today's work frenzy, especially in some companies and working cultures.

For the employees of a company, being in charge of their own tasks and thus managing their own time means having a concept of freedom and autonomy, which leads people to be more serene and above all to have more drive and dedication during working hours.

As tasks intensify on a daily basis and working hours become longer, concentration often starts to lack, and with it also serenity and productivity, causing negative effects in the activities performed

⁴ K. Sayer, L. Harvey, *Empowerment in Business Process Reengineering: an ethnographic study of implementation discourses*, University of Technology, Sydney, 1997, pp. 427-428.

⁵ S. Laoyan, *How to Start Fresh on Business Process Reengineering*, Asana, <https://asana.com/it/resources/business-process-reengineering-bpr>, Accessed 10 Jan. 2023.

and thus in the functioning of the department, leading in many cases to the malfunctioning of the entire company structure. The above-mentioned techniques are therefore a useful tool for all employees, but above all for the entire company.

1.3 The effects of working environment on people's life

It is very important, indeed, for those who deal with human resource management, to attract and retain the best people for the business, to find who really has the skills needed, training and integrating them according to all their different orientations.

But this is just a small part of the job: it is critical to make sure that all the employees are comfortable within the company and that the organizational structure and the work environment enable them to work well, day by day. But what if this does not happen? If the employee does not feel well or comfortable within the company, this will negatively affect his or her productivity, having a negative impact also on the whole business. For this reason, in order to achieve company objectives, it is essential to keep staff motivated and to promote a good organizational environment.

One of the elements that has the greatest impact on people's productivity is stress.

The “Burnout” syndrome has been identified as the higher level of stress, commonly known to come from a number of factors, including poor working conditions. In turn, such high levels of stress create many problems both for employees and for the company, involving costs.

Stressed staff are more inclined to get involved in accidents at work, do not know how to establish relationships with customers and hinder the entire team. In addition, many other problems come as a consequence, such as: insomnia, anxiety, mental disorders, headaches, blood pressure, heart problems and gastritis, that ultimately affect people's performance. Considering that people spend most of the day carrying out work-related activities, that require both physical and psychological energy, work is one of the most influential elements in their quality of life.

Therefore, efforts to improve the quality of life of employees and maintain a good organizational environment are vital for the organization itself, also to increase the level of team satisfaction and the overall productivity⁶. When this happens, the results are evident: people are more motivated and this positively affects their performances, which translates into additional benefits for the company.

An adequate working environment and a good balance between work and private life contribute to

⁶ Gympass, *In che modo la qualità della vita dei dipendenti influenza la produttività?*, <https://blog.gympass.com/it/come-la-qualita-della-vita-dei-dipendenti-influenza-la-produttivita/>, Accessed 12 Sept. 2022.

the success of the business in this way:

- Greater business productivity
- Fewer layoffs
- Physical and mental health of employees
- Active participation of employees
- More motivation
- Strong sense of belonging
- Positive perception of the company
- Teamwork
- Good communication between employees
- Greater satisfaction
- Involvement of employees in company activities
- Better results in terms of performance
- Effectiveness of the business strategy
- Improvement of the quality of services
- Greater social impact⁷

If it is true that companies need bureaucracy for their operations in an organized and fixed way, it is also true that the excessive lack of flexibility can interrupt internal relationships and affect the quality of life in the workplace.

Therefore, even if an employee has the right skills to achieve a goal and do its job inside the organization, if she or he is not stimulated and motivated, or even worse has bad working conditions and no work-life balance, won't perform the tasks properly. Consequently, investing in the quality of life of employees also helps in achieving their goals and organizational objectives, ensuring better results for the company.

1.4 Overworking and the consequences of burnout

One of the causes of the “Burnout” syndrome, and one of the most influential ones, is overworking. The time people spend working can influence many things regarding their private life and their life inside the company.

⁷ J. G. S. Estrada, I.J. G. Pupo, Y.B. M. Rodríguez & R. Cañedo Andalia, *Clima y cultura organizacional: dos componentes esenciales en la productividad laboral*, Revista Cubana de información en Ciencias de la Salud, 2009, pp. 67-75.

“Stress is the construct to which the greatest range of different forms of work discomfort can be traced” (Cooper, 1981). “The person who feels bad in the workplace responds in most cases in terms of distress with different degrees of negativity and intensity” (Leiter and Maslach, 2003). “In this regard, the burnout syndrome is the result of a stressful working condition, to which the person has not known how to or been able to respond adequately; burnout has a gradual onset and is the consequence of chronic stress” (Peddiztsi and Nonnis, 2014)⁸.

The professionalism of employees suffering from Burnout syndrome is affected by the accumulation of stress over time, they take on negative attitudes towards themselves, devaluing themselves and believing that they are not able to do their work to which they pay less attention, and are therefore predisposed to make more mistakes. The decline in job satisfaction increases and commitment to the organization decreases, which leads the worker to display inappropriate attitudes towards colleagues and managers. The employee's private sphere is also plagued, the quality of life is lowered and there are health related issues.

Not only does the employee himself suffer the consequences of the Burnout syndrome, but the whole organization also feels the consequences of what the employee is suffering. As a result of personal ineffectiveness and a decline in job satisfaction, absenteeism and turnover increase, leading to a deterioration in the quality of the service provided⁹.

For some years now, working hours have increased and therefore the work has become more intensive, the causes of this are to be found in globalization: the increase in production and sales, tight deadlines and more hunger for money from the companies. Those who pay the most for the consequences, however, are the employees.

According to a Stanford economist, John Pencavel, after about 48 hours a week a worker's productivity drops down significantly. There may be an initial jump in activity due to overwork, but then people who work more than 55 hours a week perform worse than those who go home at a normal hour and rest, dropping so much that putting in any more hours would be pointless. And, those who work up to 70 hours a week are only getting the same amount of work done as those who put in the 55 hours¹⁰.

There are also other costs for employers. An aged care facility in Sweden tried a six-hour working day and found that nurses took fewer sick days and were more productive. Tired workers cost employers \$ 100 billion in lost productivity¹¹.

⁸ A.Castello, Disagio Lavorativo, www.psicologiadellavoro.org, Accessed 21 Jan. 2023.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ J. Pencavel, *The Productivity of Working Hours*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp.15-21.

¹¹ M. Savage, *What really happened when Swedes tried six-hour days?*, Bbc, www.bbc.com/news/business-38843341, Accessed 13 Nov. 2022.

Generally speaking, the habit of working overtime is bad for us and for work efficiency, and it affects many aspects of our lives:

- First, it causes physical health problems. The stress that derives from overworking can lead to many issues in our stomach and also to higher blood pressure. Moreover, a research from the University of Columbia states that even a couple of extra hours of sitting in the office daily can have very bad consequences: there is a direct correlation between long sedentary work culture and heart disorders.
- Second, working overtime has an effect on mental health: it can double the possibilities of developing depression. Because our mind is a muscle, it needs to rest and relax after having worked hard, and more hours at work means more pressure on the mind and less time for it to recover. Indeed, a research published by “The Independent”, 2000, states that 40% of the people who work long hours are stressed and suffer from insomnia, depression, overeating, or excessive drinking.
- Third, it affects the working-life balance, having consequences into an employee's personal life. Studies from Cornell University suggest that people putting in extra hours at work were 30% more likely to have family conflicts. In addition, more time at work means less time for yourself, friends, family, social life and so on, that are so important in people’s life.
- Fourth and last, overworking decreases productivity. As said before, overtime and productivity or work efficiency are co-related. Working overtime is not always a conscious choice for employees: often there are unavoidable factors forcing people to spend more hours than they wish working. Sometimes people assume that putting in long hours will help them get more work done, but productivity actually drops down when working overtime. Some organizations are also realizing that overtime decreases the overall efficiency of the employees and they also consider it a liability because overtime needs to be compensated monetarily and it adds to the cost of the company. Moreover, overtime hampers the work culture and negatively affects job satisfaction levels, leaving the employees unmotivated¹².

For the above reasons, many organizations lose some of their most talented and engaged staff due to burnout. A recent report in “Harvard Business Review” estimates that 1 in 5 employees is at risk, and this leads to a drop in business performance, but it also entails costs.

Employee engagement is a major concern for HR leaders. Year after year, concerned managers and researchers discuss Gallup’s shocking statistic that seven out of 10 U.S. employees report feeling unengaged. Figuring out how to increase employee engagement has been a burning question for

¹² L. Brown, *How Working Overtime Can Affect Your Work Efficiency?*, Invensislearning, www.invensislearning.com/blog/overtime-and-work-efficiency/, Accessed 06 Jan. 2023.

companies and consultants across the board.

The many positive outcomes of engagement include greater productivity and quality of work, increased safety, and employee retention, but at the same time when we are highly engaged in working towards a goal we can also experience high levels of stress. A recent study conducted by Yale University, the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, in collaboration with the Faas Foundation, has put into question the idea of engagement as a purely beneficial experience. This survey examined the levels of engagement and burnout in over 1,000 U.S. employees. For some people, engagement is indeed a purely positive experience; 2 out of 5 employees in the survey reported high engagement and low burnout. These employees also reported high levels of positive outcomes, such as feeling positive emotions and acquiring new skills. However, the data also showed that one out of five employees reported both high engagement and high burnout, so were passionate about their work, but also reported high levels of stress and frustration. These apparent model employees also reported the highest turnover intentions, meaning that companies may be at risk of losing some of their most motivated and hard-working employees not for a lack of engagement, but because of their high stress and burnout symptoms.

Many HR departments, often offer wellness programs to defeat stress, usually through healthy eating, exercise, or mindfulness. While chronic stress is not good for employees, company wellness initiatives are not the primary way to respond to it. The data report that while wellness initiatives can be helpful, a much bigger lever is the work itself. HR should work with front-line managers to monitor the level of demands they're placing on people, as well as the balance between demands and resources. The higher the work demands, the higher is employees' need for support, resources, acknowledgement, or opportunities for recovery. By avoiding emailing people after hours, setting a norm that evenings and weekends are work-free, and encouraging a regular lunch break in the middle of the day, leaders can make sure they're sending a consistent message that balance matters.

Therefore, engagement is key, but increased demands on employees need to be accompanied with increased resources and balance¹³.

1.5 Working time trends around the world

Based on international benchmarks on working hours, which generally provides for a full-time job 8 hours per day, 40 per week and a maximum of 34 overworking per month, the “International Labor

¹³ E. Seppälä, J. Moeller, *1 in 5 Employees Is Highly Engaged and at Risk of Burnout*, Harvard Business Review, <https://hbr.org/2018/02/1-in-5-highly-engaged-employees-is-at-risk-of-burnout>, Accessed 23 Jan. 2023.

Office” (ILO) has developed a new study highlighting some modern aspects and issues of working hours in modern society on a global scale: *Working Time Around the World: Trends in working hours, laws, and policies in a global comparative perspective*¹⁴.

The study indicates that about 22 per cent of the world's workforce, have excessively long working hours, and highlights that about one in five workers worldwide, or 600 million people, still work more than 48 hours a week. It deals with working hours in 50 countries, including developing countries and transition economies. What comes to light is that traditional working time concerns, such as long hours combined with insufficient rest periods, remain a matter in many countries. At the same time, new issues associated with deregulation and more flexible working time arrangements are becoming increasingly significant, not only in industrialized countries, but in parts of the developing world as well. It emerges that the distribution of working hours is highly variable: in most states some people work too much and in others not enough.

However, the study also points out that shorter working hours have many positive effects on various fronts, such as health benefits, fewer accidents in the workplace, higher productivity and performance, also in private life. At the same time, in most cases in developing countries and transition economies, people who work a few hours a day are actually underemployed and thus at greater risk of falling into poverty.

The report also shows that, in general, regulations and strategies to reduce working hours have limited effect in developing economies, particularly in terms of maximum weekly hours. Attempts to reduce working hours in these countries have been unsuccessful for a number of reasons: among them in poorer countries the desire for higher earnings or the desire of entrepreneurs to improve their company's income.

An important aspect of the study is related to gender differences: men tend to work more than women in most countries, probably due to domestic commitments to the responsibility for caring for other family members, which is often still attributed to women. As a result, women in developing countries and in transition economies are resorting to self-employment as a means to meet these responsibilities, while maintaining a minimum of autonomy.

In addition, it is highlighted how the development of the tertiary sector and the resulting informal employment is a major cause of longer working hours, particularly in the wholesale and retail trade, hotel and catering, transport and communications sectors. In this type of sector, in many countries of the world, about 30 per cent of men (employed or self-employed) work more than 49 hours per week. These jobs also often involve shifts and working hours that hinder a balanced relationship between

¹⁴ S. Lee, D. McCann e J. C. Messenger, *Working Time Around the World: Trends in working hours, laws, and policies in a global comparative perspective*, Ginevra, ILO, 2007, pp. 141.

work and private life, a major reason for burnout for many people.

Finally, the study makes some suggestions for promoting the concept of decent work also in terms of working hours: Decent Working Times.

These include:

- reduce working hours to reduce the risk of accidents and illness and the costs for all parties involved;
- adopting measures and schedules to reconcile family and work and to allow a work-life balance, e.g. through flexible working hours, family leave, and part-time work;
- adoption of and consequent compliance with reasonable statutory time limits, which help to improve the performance of people and thus of companies, with appropriate remuneration¹⁵;

Based on these sources, we can state that in many countries, despite the laws and directives regarding the topic, the working hours to which people are subjected represent a serious problem. While from a human point of view this is unacceptable, from the point of view of work performance and results it is also a major matter for companies. The studies reviewed point to an inverse proportion between long working hours and efficiency, and this only hurts both sides.

As mentioned above, attempts at improvement have failed in various parts of the world for specific reasons and it seems that, in an increasingly industrialized and economy-driven world, the situation needs a great push to change.

The role of HR, therefore, should consist first of all in creating a serene and stimulating working environment, looking at employees as people and not only as a workforce, and then reviewing the resulting positive effects in the whole business.

¹⁵ S. Lee, D. McCann e J. C. Messenger, *Working Time Around the World: Trends in working hours, laws, and policies in a global comparative perspective*, Ginevra, ILO, 2007, pp. 142-146.

CHAPTER 2

HRM in China and the 996 phenomenon

About the topic of poor working conditions and bad working environment, lately, particular attention was given to China and its corporate culture. Since its integration into the world economy in the 1990s, China has become a new economic and political power in the world, thanks to the exceptional growth that has pushed its economy to the top of the world rankings and its claim to greater political weight at the international level. The country's rapid development trajectory has resulted in a restructuring of the domestic economy, while its important role in global supply chains, has changed the global flows of investment and goods.

In addition, the country's regional and international projection has greatly increased its influence in international relations to the extent that it has the power to change economic relations and geopolitical balances not only in Asia, but also in many other areas of the world. The country's exceptional growth had been underlined by the rapid increase in GDP per capita, which rose from USD 709 in 1996 to USD 8,123 in 2016. However, China's per capita growth rate, which measured 13% in 2007, has slowed since the Great Recession, measuring 6% in 2016 and 7% in 2017. Despite this slowdown, the Chinese economy continued to undergo great transformations due to economic growth, urbanization and ageing of the population. These economic, social and demographic forces have had deep effects on the structure of labor markets and the types of opportunities available to Chinese workers, as well as on their working conditions¹⁶.

Because of such an exponential growth, Chinese economic system continuously goes through many organizational changes to keep up with global and internal expectations. Nowadays, following this wave, firms are becoming Chinese economy's workhorse and are increasingly gaining importance, with a consequent reorganization of internal structures and work habits, leading to significant growth at an economic level, but bringing to light many downsides, especially in terms of human rights.

Over the past two years, however, the Chinese economic situation has undergone some major changes, and reports on economic growth in China confirm the stagnation. The 3.9% increase in GDP in the third quarter brought the annual growth rate to 3%, that is well below the target of 5.5%, the lowest in three decades.

One of the main reasons for this economic phenomenon is the uncertainty effect generated by the zero-COVID policy, so the recession risk is linked not to an economic factor, but to public health

¹⁶ Eurofound and International Labour Organization, *Working conditions in a global perspective*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, and International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2019, pp. 67.

policy. The reactions of impatience expressed by Chinese citizens seem to be provoking a change of course on the part of the Chinese authorities. But there is another consequence to uncertainty: The Great Depression. Uncertainty raises risk aversion in all economic actors, changing and slowing down their usual choices: households in terms of consumption, companies in terms of productive investments, banks in terms of granting credit. The economy stagnates, and may enter a full-blown recession¹⁷.

The health of the Chinese economy is in increasingly poor shape. The central bank has cut the rate on medium-term loans by 10 basis points to 2.75%, and foreign investors are increasingly uneasy. In this scenario, many companies are suffering in terms of turnover, and also in terms of their workforce. For example, Chinese tech giant Tencent reported its first quarterly revenue drop since going public, struggling with China's economic recession, pandemic-related disruptions, and continued control by regulators. Tencent also cut about 5,500 jobs, down to 110,715 employees, the first quarterly drop in its workforce since 2014.

The data portray a situation where consumption is low and there is youth unemployment at 19.9%. This increases the pressure on Xi Jinping's administration to reinvigorate the Chinese economy. "For years China has been the world's spendthrift of last resort" Bloomberg wrote, "but imports, measured in dollars, have fallen, while exports are rising after COVID."

Definitely a difficult period for the Chinese economy, which cannot find the right pace to engage in a recovery that would be indispensable also for its international policy¹⁸.

Within this economic framework, a great weight is placed on the still existing workforce, which has to make up for the lack of a necessary number of workers and for the economic downturn by aiming for a quick recovery. For this reason, there is a sharp increase in the demand for labor effort from employees, which tends to result in higher intensity and longer working hours.

2.1 Chinese working hours' policies

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the issue of long working hours and work intensity have a strong impact on the business organization, but it is mainly a consequence of the influence these aspects have on employee's lives.

¹⁷ D. Masciandaro, *Il clima d'incertezza che paralizza l'economia cinese*, *Ilsole24ore*, www.ilsole24ore.com/art/il-clima-d-incertezza-che-paralizza-l-economia-cinese-AECy21LC, Accessed 20 Dec. 2022.

¹⁸ L. Aprati, *L'economia cinese in difficoltà: per Tencent calo del 56% dei profitti e 5500 dipendenti licenziati*, *Rainews*, www.rainews.it/articoli/2022/08/leconomia-cinese-in-difficolt-per-tencent--calo-del-56-dei-profitti-e-5500-dipendenti-licenziati-73335960-7c28-4374-88b8-ea1095525402.html, Accessed 10 Dec. 2022.

Five main laws are used to protect the rights and safety of workers in China: the Labor Law of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Labor Contract Law of the PRC, the Trade Union Law of the PRC, the Work Safety Law of the PRC and the Law of the PRC on the Prevention and Control of Occupational Diseases. According to Chinese Labor Law, a normal working day is eight hours-long, maximum of 44 hours a week, and any work beyond that should be extra paid as overtime. But despite the written laws, employees are frequently discouraged from filing for overtime.

Laws regulating working hours in China are categorized according to the following systems: the default standard system, the comprehensive work hour system, and the flexible system.

Under the standard work hour system, an employee's workday should not exceed eight hours and an average work week should be no more than 40 hours, that is a five-day work week, or at least one rest day per week. Overtime work under the standard system must not go beyond 3 hours per day and 36 hours per month. Most white-collar work falls under this category.

The comprehensive work hour system accumulates work hours over a specified period: weekly, monthly, quarterly, or yearly. Therefore, the average number of hours is calculated based on this accumulation period. These rates match those of the standard work hour system for extra hours worked and work on public holidays, but no rest day is foreseen under this system. This system is most suited to work roles with irregular shifts, such as seasonal or project-based work.

The non-fixed (flexible) work hour system suits employees whose working hours are difficult to measure, who will generally be paid as a salaried employee. This salary is a fixed amount paid per period, often monthly. No overtime cost is expected with this work hour system: while employers are required to observe appropriate work and rest schedules, it is up to the employer's discretion. This system, as the comprehensive one, also requires the approval of the local labor bureau prior to implementation¹⁹.

As we can see, therefore, there is absolutely no lack of a legislative system regulating working hours in China, but in many of the country's companies, above all those who belong to the tech sector, employees frequently work far longer than the hours required by the law. In many workplaces in China, the company culture has pushed employees to work 70 hours per week, and often the extra hours are unpaid.

¹⁹ Z. Zhang, "996" is Ruled Illegal: Understanding China's Changing Labor System, China Briefing, www.china-briefing.com/news/996-is-ruled-illegal-understanding-chinas-changing-labor-system, Accessed 17 Feb. 2023.

2.2 The 996 phenomenon

This organization of working shifts, which crosses the 70-hour week threshold, is what we call 996 culture: working from 9 am till 9 pm for 6 days a week.

For some years now, the 996 culture has been taking hold within many Chinese companies, as anticipated especially within the tech sector, as a consequence of the exponential growth of the Chinese economy. As the demand from other countries towards China has risen, and China's economy is now particularly linked to export and has a quantity focus, the employers are expecting and requiring employees to not just do their bests to meet the objectives of the business, but go much further.

This working schedule is not necessarily widespread in all industries or all parts of China, but in the tech industry, some business leaders have argued that working 9-9-6 is necessary for achieving business success and personal wealth.

Michael Leiter, a professor of organizational psychology at Deakin University in Melbourne, said the 9-9-6 schedule leads in many cases to burnout, exhaustion and poor work. "People cannot maintain quality under such schedules. Without recovery opportunities, performance flags during one 12-hour shift. Multiple shifts in succession would magnify that effect," he said. "People would work beyond their energy capacity, being chronically tired. People would have few recovery opportunities, as the other 12 hours would be mostly commuting, eating and sleep ... Creativity and precision would be low."

Jennifer Moss, a workplace wellness expert stated: "We stop being productive after 50 hours, and really we're our most productive in a 40-hour workweek. So, 70 to 80 hours of working each week isn't actually better for business". "Inhumane and dangerous. The World Health Organization recently announced that working over 55 hours per week can increase heart disease, and persistent overwork can lead to an early death. Overwork kills 2.8 million people per year." She reported about the 9-9-6 schedule.

Long working hours can severely limit a person's family life and personal commitments: "It is known to affect relationships and time spent together as a family. Women have stated that they are less interested in having children" Moss said. Some workers "claim not to sleep, not to eat, to have started taking medication for depression and stress. Others describe having no hobbies or free time: their whole life was focused on work"²⁰.

The 996 culture is directly linked to the burnout syndrome, but not only under a superficial aspect: in

²⁰ L. Shepherd, *China Prohibits Excessive Overtime Work*, SHRM, www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/global-hr/pages/china-prohibits-excessive-overtime-work.aspx, Accessed 06 Dec. 2022.

many cases it represents the point of no return for workers. Indeed, unfortunately, in numerous cases in China suicides and deaths related to inhuman working hours have been recorded. Cases of death or suicide are therefore mainly linked to absurd levels of stress and the inability from people to stop and rest. Such distributed working hours lead to employees no longer having a private life, no longer being able to spend quality time with their families or having different stimuli outside work. With no distractions or external input, a state of work depression arises, and the employee can no longer perceive his or her work as pleasure. As these working shifts are spread out over the entire working year, employees have no recovery periods and no way to recharge their batteries. Obviously, for many people leaving or losing their jobs is not a viable alternative: bringing home wages and making ends meet is what drives them to accept certain conditions from which they cannot escape in any way, and this leads them to see no way out.

After several deaths related to overwork in China, the 996 culture has come under increased public scrutiny. As a result, for employers associated with it, there are legal risks, such as the loss of reputation and monetary penalties. But why is it accepted then, even if it goes against law? Actually, this same work ethic is also seen as the driver of success for these firms that, by taking advantage of this, are becoming very prominent on the world stage.

As Jack Ma, who founded online retail giant Alibaba, says, this culture helps to hit out at "slackers", because China needs its workers to stay competitive. Jack Ma and Alibaba have been outspoken about the revenue benefits, and they have the most to gain; he called working 9-9-6 "a huge blessing"²¹.

"If you join Alibaba, you should get ready to work 12 hours a day. Otherwise why did you come to Alibaba? We don't need those who comfortably work eight hours" Mr. Ma said, according to comments posted on the company's Wechat account.

Many other Chinese entrepreneurs are defending the 996 schedule, as Richard Liu, the founder of the Chinese e-commerce company JD.com. According to Mr. Liu, nowadays the number of "slackers" in his company had grown: "If this carries on, JD will have no hope and the company will be heartlessly kicked out of the market! Slackers are not my brothers.", he said.

There are also many cases in which companies pushed employees beyond the 996 work schedule: not a long ago, Ant Financial, a financial services company affiliated with Alibaba, was listed as having a "9106" work schedule, so starting at 9am, ending at 10pm, and employees at a software firm in Shandong province said they were required to work more than 100 hours of overtime in a month.

As China's economy has slowed and issues have emerged in the tech sector, more employees are starting to reconsider the merits of working long hours. "They were willing to accept long hours when

²¹ W. Yip, *China steps in to regulate brutal '996' work culture*, Bbc News, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-58381538, Accessed 10 Jan. 2023.

business was good and they were being well rewarded but that is not the case anymore. Staff are being laid off and pay is stagnating so staff are less willing to work as hard” said Geoffrey Crothall of China Labor Bulletin²².

As China became the biggest and most globally expanded market, the demand and the need to achieve more is so high that the only possible way seen from some of the greatest entrepreneurs, is using this kind of method, by leaving behind the importance of the employees lives.

This working culture has a significant negative impact on the lives of employees, but these aspects also have serious consequences within Chinese society and will become increasingly prevalent in the long term. China’s birth rate keeps going down. According to multiple surveys, young people have expressed that always working overtime leaves them with no time to fall in love, get married or have children. There’s no life outside of work. All they are left with is lack of sleep.

China’s Labour Association says 996 creates a great concern to China’s goal of promoting common prosperity through protecting basic rights and interests of workers. It goes against society’s expectations of what a responsible enterprise should do and must not become the norm.

2.2.1 Consequences of the pandemic on the 996 culture

In a time overshadowed by the COVID-19, employee’s stress and burnout are higher than normal: there are many fearing the brutal 996 culture has become worse due to pressure from the pandemic. The “New Work” system that has leading innovations like remote work and hybrid mode has been adopted globally during and after the Pandemic. In the history of work, great changes marked each decade, and technology and innovation played a significant role in their implementation for many countries, as also China. Indeed, from the start of COVID-19 pandemic, China shifted to remote work. However, after the relaxation of rigid regulations, cities began to open up and so did workplaces. After the return to work, the hybrid mode emerged from workforce practice²³. Some companies experienced an increase in productivity after adopting the new work system, while others experienced no change. However, many workers reported negative aspects and bad consequences.

Working from home was a heavenly idea for many. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it promised an

²² L. Kuo, *Working 9 to 9: Chinese tech workers push back against long hours*, The Guardian, www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/15/china-tech-employees-push-back-against-long-hours-996-alibaba-huawei, Accessed 06 Dec. 2022.

²³ N. Schuster, *New Work in China – Work From Home, 996 and Employee Motivation*, Published by Human Resource Management Academic Research Society on International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i3/12885>, Accessed 16 Dec. 2022.

end to crowded commutes, inflexible schedules and intrusive middle management. What workers appreciated about working from home was the freedom it promised. However, more than two years of continuous blockades seem to have taken some of the shine off it. Online, “exhausting” and “depressing” are now among the most frequently used words to describe remote working arrangements. Moreover, many people stopped aiming at working under this mode since it ceased to be an option and instead became mandatory. In May 2022, “The Paper” surveyed users of three platforms, WeChat, Jinri Toutiao, and The Paper’s own site, to investigate for their attitudes and thoughts toward remote work. More than half of the respondents stated that they work more hours at home than in workplaces, and just less than 30% stated that working from home shortens their working days. Those who work remotely often extend their working hours without realising it, perhaps in order to complete tasks, but in the long run, by accumulating extra hours on a daily basis, this can lead to burnout.

Although working from home eliminates the hassle of commuting to and from the office, and gives the employees the possibility to rest more without being directly controlled, it also blurs the line between workers' personal and professional lives. More than 80% of office workers who reported working longer hours said they felt that the distinction between work and life was erased. They often worked overtime without realising it. Many workers stated that it is like being on service the whole day, and expressed their frustration at the fact that the flood of messages from colleagues and customers kept arriving, even after normal working hours, leaving them no choice but to reply.

Is like “being on call 24 hours a day”.

Moreover, many of the interviewees stated that working from home exacerbated communication problems at work, and the online communication can be immensely tiring and time-consuming. Although the pandemic has led to a boom in online collaboration software, technology cannot always compensate for the physical distance between colleagues²⁴. Indeed, if communication is poor, the likelihood of having to do the work more than once increases, and this also wastes employees' time. "Burnout has only increased globally this year, and teleworkers are far from immune, particularly since most of these 9-9-6 employees have signed 'struggle agreements' that make it so they can't push back if they are exhausted or burned out from working too much overtime", Moss noted.

²⁴ C. Liangxian, W. Yasai, Z. Jin, *Chinese Embrace Remote Work — Just Not Under Lockdown*, Sixth Tone, www.sixthtone.com/news/1010636/chinese-embrace-remote-work-%E2%80%94-just-not-under-lockdown, Accessed 21 Dec. 2022.

2.3 996 case studies

As anticipated in the previous chapters, the stress resulting from burnout is not a superficial phenomenon, but brutally affects people's lives: what is really scary about it, is that this culture of overworking has led people to very bad living condition, even conducting them to death and suicide. Even if China's top court has ruled that the 996 overtime working culture is illegal, we have evidences that laws have not been enforced in many companies.

As this topic is very socially impactful for China, it is interesting to analyse several case studies which followed one another in a short period of time, instead of just one, to better understand how widespread the phenomenon is. Most of these case studies can be traced back to technology companies, which, as already mentioned, have experienced a great increase in recent years. As the social public attention has shifted to other topical issues, the case studies analysed mostly date back to the period from 2020 to the beginning of 2022, but their consequences propagate to the present day.

On August 2021, the Supreme People's Court (SPC) and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MOHRSS) issued a guideline listing 10 typical overtime work cases, all won by employees, some of which are mentioned below.

- The fast-growing e-commerce platform Pingduoduo (PDD) was blamed for the death of two employees due to overwork. In December 2020, a 22-year-old employee named Zhang, working for this company, collapsed on her way home after working a string of excessively long shifts, and died six hours later. The company then made headlines again after another employee, named Tan, died by suicide after taking leave from the company and returning to his home town. He had been working with the company for about six months.
- Other cases concern workers' overtime pay and compensation, including payment for injuries while working overtime: a worker named Li was sent by a service company to work at an unidentified media company. On December 2020, Li fainted in a bathroom at work and died of a heart attack as he was about to finish a 12-hour night shift. Li regularly worked more than 300 hours per month and did not take more than three days off in a standard month. Li's employers had not purchased accident insurance for him, so the court said both the service company and the media company were responsible for Li's death and ordered the two to compensate Li's family with RMB 766,911.55.

Compared to formal workers, who can rely on labour arbitration and local supervision to defend their rights, millions of gig workers, such as couriers, deliverymen and ride-hailing drivers, face greater difficulties in protecting their rights.

- A worker of a parcel delivery company was fired after refusing to work overtime: when he requested labour dispute arbitration, the arbitration committee ordered the company to compensate the worker with RMB 8,000 for violation of the Chinese labour law.

- In January 2021, in a video widely circulated on Chinese social media, Liu Jin, 45 years old, working as a deliveryman for Alibaba-owned takeaway food platform Ele.me, set himself on fire with gasoline outside a Taizhou shop over a pay dispute, shouting that he wanted his money. A few months later, an investigation titled “Delivery Workers, Trapped in the System” went viral on China's most popular social media platforms and created a great discussion about how the tech companies' algorithm has reduced the time limits for delivery workers, pushing them to race against the clock on the road. In a similar case, a 43-year-old delivery man collapsed on the job and died while also delivering food for Eleme.

In response, Chinese regulators forced technology companies to take care of gig workers' rights with a series of policies. In the same year, seven authorities, including the State Administration of Market Regulatory (SAMR), issued a guideline for online food delivery platforms to optimise remuneration rules and establish a reasonable working hours' mechanism. In addition, eight authorities published a guideline to safeguard the rights and interests of workers such as couriers, delivery drivers and ride-hailing drivers.

At the same time, the capital market has been sensitive to the sudden regulatory pressure. Shares of Meituan, one of the largest food delivery platforms in China, went down by almost 14%, the worst on record, after new rules required the company to pay social insurance to cover injuries and illnesses of drivers delivering food and to pay them no less than the local minimum wage.

In the two days after the Ministry of Transport gave guidelines to increase protection for couriers, also shares of other courier companies fell, by 5.8% for YUNDA Holding and 5% for STO Express²⁵.

- According to Agence France-Presse (AFP), a 25-year-old content moderator for short-video streaming site Bilibili died of brain haemorrhage after working throughout a week-long public holiday. The 25-year-old died in hospital soon after being taken there. The company denied that it had overworked the employee: Bilibili issued an internal memo denying that overwork was the cause of the employee's death. The company stated that the man had worked from 9.30 a.m. to 6.30 p.m. in the last week, without working overtime. But the news of his death, spread by a workplace blogger, reignited the discussion on the toxic 996 overtime culture 996. A hashtag linked to the man's death “Bilibili worker died suddenly after working overtime during the Lunar New Year”, which included

²⁵ Z. Zhang, “996” is Ruled Illegal: Understanding China’s Changing Labor System, China Briefing, www.china-briefing.com/news/996-is-ruled-illegal-understanding-chinas-changing-labor-system, Accessed 17 Feb. 2023.

accusations of overwork trended on Weibo and receiving hundreds of millions of views, included accusations of the government not doing enough to address the problems in the year following a series of high-profile deaths linked to overwork. The post also quoted anonymous colleagues who claimed they were forced to work overtime and people from the company who said they worked 12-hour night shifts during the Lunar New Year holiday. Others stated they had difficulty claiming reimbursement for holidays accumulated before they expired. “At Bilibili, even if you have annual days off, they wouldn’t really let you go. And there is no pay for overwork,” said one. Another employee added: “Our work intensity is like this: if you work the night shift, it is from 9pm to 9am. Bilibili requires us to work during the spring festival. A lot of people have left.” Bilibili confirmed the employee's death in a statement and said they had apologised to his family while terming the incident a “wake-up call”, that would let them pay more attention to the health of its employees. "We should make active improvements in checking up on the physical health of employees to prevent similar tragedies from happening again," the statement also reported²⁶.

These sudden deaths had added to a long list of other similar deaths of young employees in recent years, sparking a debate over the 996 culture. For this reason, the city of Beijing has launched a two-month campaign to regulate the overtime work culture in industries and enterprises. Prior to Beijing, other cities have also launched similar initiatives to better regulate work hours, as the southern Guangdong province and the southwest province of Sichuan.

The Human Resources and Social Security Bureau of Beijing Municipality reported that it will strengthen its monitoring of how employers schedule working hours, breaks and holidays, as well as overtime and compensation issues. The authorities stated that the aim is to “effectively protect the legitimate rights and interests of workers and build harmonious labour relations”. The campaign mainly targets sectors well known for their overtime culture, including internet companies, technology and R&D intensive companies, manufacturers and labour-intensive service providers. It has been stated that violators will be subject to administrative punishments, but the details of the penalties are unclear.

- A viral resignation post denouncing overtime schedules to meet production requirements has added to the growing employee protest in recent years. A Beijing employee named Feng from the short video platform Kuaishou told Sixth Tone that he was unaware of the city government's campaign against the overwork culture and doubted its real effects. He works from 10am to 9.30pm, Monday to Thursday, and puts in three and a half hours of overtime every day. "At night I am

²⁶ H. Davidson, *Claims that overwork killed China tech worker reignites '996' debate*, The Guardian, www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/09/claims-that-overwork-killed-china-tech-worker-reignites-996-debate, Accessed 21 Aug. 2022.

inefficient and often fall asleep after 1am," said the 34-year-old software engineer. "There is a lot of work and ours is such a corporate culture."²⁷

The culture of overwork is a persistent problem in Chinese companies, despite the fact that the authorities consider it illegal and companies are asked to stop these unhealthy practices. Unfortunately, as we have seen, investigations into compliance with labour standards are often done when it is too late for some, but hopefully they will be useful for the employees of the future.

2.4 The “Tang Ping” movement

Lately, a move towards better labor protection has become the attitude of many young Chinese: unlike their parents, who strongly believed that hard work pays off, they are going through a growing sense of dissatisfaction among exhausting labor conditions.

According to this emerging attitude, a new movement is taking shape: the “Tang Ting” movement. Tang Ping (躺平) literally means to “lie flat”, referring to the principle that people should not overwork and instead be content with more attainable achievement, so refers to a simple lifestyle without effort making. The Tang Ping movement took off during 2021, since many felt they were coming under increasing pressure to work even harder, also because of the break out of COVID-19. During the pandemic, many employees left the job, but many companies decided to reduce the amount of people inside the organization, resulting in a greater commitment from those who were working. People "feel so apathetic now they're having to deal with the coronavirus and feel exhausted. They literally just want to lie down with a book, or sit and watch some TV, rather than keep the momentum going by working hard," says Kerry Allen, the “BBC”'s China media analyst.

The term Tang Ping is believed to have originated in a post on a popular Chinese social media site. In April 2021, a post entitled "Tang Ping is justice" on Baidu Tieba described a simple lifestyle so named. In the post, the author claimed that he had not worked full-time for 2 years, but only worked part-time with a monthly income of CNY 200, putting aside stress factors typical of contemporary China. The idea behind it, not overworking and taking more time for themselves, has been inspiring many people and has been described as a spiritual movement.

According to the “Sixth Tone”, a Tang Ping group on the platform Douban had attracted 6,000 members. However, the group has been deleted, and also all the hashtags #TangPing has been banned

²⁷ L. Meihan, *Beijing Launches Drive to Regulate '996' Work Culture in City*, Sixth Tone, www.sixthtone.com/news/1009929/beijing-launches-drive-to-regulate-996-work-culture-in-city-, Accessed 13 Nov. 2022.

on Sina Weibo by censors to prevent people getting familiar with the trend²⁸.

After this post, indeed, the meaning of Tang Ping was interpreted by society as negative resistance behavior against social competition. Most official Chinese media have criticized this phenomenon, but some Chinese media and scholars have also mentioned the structural social context behind Tang Ping, trying to justify it with the high pressure to buy a flat and care for children, the excessive competition in education and the workplace, and the low rate of return after efforts. In most cases, therefore, driven by conditions of high stress and social uncertainty, some Chinese started to give up part of their ambitions and desires and chose to lie flat²⁹.

This principle, however, worries the authorities, as they are frightened by losing the labor force and need these workers to keep the economy going. China needs people to remain competitive.

Moreover, experts say that nowadays employees may feel more free to take their bosses to court, and be more likely to invoke their rights under the labor laws when they feel they have been mistreated, as Angela Zhang, a law professor from the University of Hong Kong, states. She also thinks that lower courts in China will also be more likely to support the stance of the workers these kind of labor disputes now.

All published media and scholarship, regardless of critical or sympathetic stance, have stated that Tang Ping is opposed to effort-making (EM) behavior and the doctrine of self-engagement, so consequently opposed to Confucian cultural value.

Another phenomenon similar to the Tang Ping, is the “Bai Lan” or “let it rot”. The term has its origins in basketball, where a team would voluntarily retreat in the face of a losing battle. Social immobility is what lies behind the Bai Lan phenomenon, according to Alfred Wu, associate professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. He attributes it to the “burden of the three mountains” education, healthcare and housing. Property inflation has pushed house prices so high that worker’s wages do not allow them to afford a flat, and China's ageing population also means rising healthcare costs. “Many people are worried about whether they will be able to receive sufficient care when they are older, so they need to have a lot of money for the future”, Wu said. “Many people struggle to have children because they don't earn a decent salary, but the pressure on them is huge to have more children”. There are also too many university graduates and too few jobs in China, and their skills may also be insufficient for a rapidly changing market. “People are competing for a slice of the pie that is too small”, he added. All this leads to very high levels of anxiety among young people, making

²⁸ K. Allen, *China's new 'tang ping' trend aims to highlight pressures of work culture*, Bbc, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57348406, Accessed 10 Jan. 2023.

²⁹ H. Hsu, *How do Chinese people evaluate “Tang-Ping” (lying flat) and effort-making: The moderation effect of return expectation*, School of Social Development, East China University of Political Science and Law, Shanghai, China on Frontiers, www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.871439/full, Accessed 15 Dec. 2022.

them feeling they "cannot change their lives", Wu said, they have resorted to a passive lifestyle³⁰. Society is evolving, and with it its actors. The new generations have ever-changing needs and desires, and are increasingly taking inspiration from the world of social media, TV and the Western ideal. Compared to previous generations, they are more aware of their rights and fight more for them, and are also exhausted by the sense of discontent surrounding themselves and their families, but not all young people can afford to "lie flat" or to "let it rot".

2.5 Cultural and historical context

To deeply understand the spread of 996 culture in China, we first need to take a step back and analyze the Chinese HRM historical and cultural background. As we will see, indeed, the Confucian HRM model has a great influence on the current Human Resources Management practices. Here, we will therefore identify different sociocultural eras while explaining their importance.

Starting from the pre-reform period, before Deng Xiaoping's economic reform, the point of view towards this topic in China was very strict: Personnel Management 人事管理 (Rénshì guǎnlǐ) was the only accepted object of discussion, in line with the Soviet-style "Iron Rice Bowl" model (1950). "Iron Rice Bowl" ,铁饭碗 (Tiě fànwǎn), is referred to the now abolished Chinese system of guaranteed lifetime employment. When the Communists took power, all workers and farmers were put under state control, granting them job security and financial security for the company, including providing them with steady income or benefits. The government was then in charge of providing, managing, and allocating the resources needed by the company to operate in the best way.

The work units (单位 danwei), which constitute a system of organization of urban society through where party and government officials monitor the behavior of the population, took control of every aspect of people's daily life, including housing, clothing, marriage and many others.

For this reason, State Owned Enterprises received special treatment from the state, which granted them economic aid during periods of financial insecurities, easy access to cheap resources and protection from competitors³¹.

If, on the one hand, the Iron Rice Bowl model provided security at first, on the other hand it caused

³⁰ CNA Insider, *From 996 to 'bai lan': Why China's young workers are choosing to 'rot' than work hard*, CNA, www.channelnewsasia.com/cna-insider/996-bai-lan-china-youths-workers-rot-work-slacker-2917476, Accessed 20 Jan. 2023.

³¹D. Berkowitz, H. May, S. Nishioka, *Recasting the Iron Rice Bowl: The Evolution of China's State-Owned Enterprises*, *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, MIT Press, vol. 99, issue 4, 2017, pp. 735-737.

the increase of recruitment beyond sustainable levels. Moreover, the focus of the companies went far from quality and productivity, since the government controlled all the resources and their only goal was the allocation of them inside the organization. This situation also led the organizations to see no incentives to reduce costs, improve products, optimize the usage and allocation of resources for doing better business. Also workers became unmotivated and unproductive because of the great protection they had, so were not pushed to increase productivity and quality of the company.

All these issues had a big influence on the working environment: due to the very low level of competition between organizations, skills and capabilities of companies and labor force stopped developing. China went through a critical economic period with regard to international competition³². Furthermore, even foreign companies entering the Chinese market had to face a low skilled and unmotivated workforce, giving them few reasons to do business there.

The situation started changing when the Iron Rice Bowl system was deemed obsolete, and also the government felt the need to make changes. The starting point for an economic change took place in 1978, with the Chinese Economic Reform and Opening Policy. In this era, China had a gradual transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, due also to the need to compete in an international arena. This gave the opportunity for organizations to become autonomous and give their own business more chances to succeed³³.

During the first years of the Reform the scholars were focused on starting using the western HRM models, but integrating it with Chinese features, creating a mix of the two. This is the reason why the hybrid model that emerged had Confucian elements.

What is also fundamental to understand today's situation of work in China is the political choice, in the 1980s, that led millions of peasants to migrate and leave their own province and go working in city factories. What happened is that young men and women, in order to migrate and work far from home, had to leave their children in the villages with their grandparents, resulting in about 60 million left behind children³⁴.

This transformation has contributed to reshaping values of work in China. The main value has become having a job to get salary and support the family from far away: the traditional values of the Chinese united family, living together under the same roof, had changed.

Due to the need to employ and reallocate resources themselves, organizations were more stimulated

³² Zhu, C. J., P. J. Dowling, *The impact of the economic system upon human resource management practices in China*, Human Resource Planning, vol. 17, no. 4, 1994, pp. 3281.

³³ M. W. Peng, Y. Lu, O. Shenkar, D. Y. L. Wang, *Treasures in the China house: A review of management and organizational research on Greater China*, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0148296399000636, Accessed 10 Feb. 2023.

³⁴ Fondazione Marco Vigorelli, *La Cultura del Lavoro in Cina*, www.marcovigorelli.org/la-cultura-del-lavoro-in-cina, Accessed 17 Feb. 2023.

and motivated to do better, enhancing productivity, optimizing profits and reducing costs. Also employees were required to work harder, while developing and exploiting their skills and competences. But this scenario has also smashed the old guarantees. Millions of workers have been fired as state-run firms have been restructured or closed, and this situation led them taking part in many protests due to the sudden absence of the welfare benefits they were once promised.

Therefore, this situation caused two different and opposite results: on the one hand the improvement of workers' ambitions and motivation, on the other hand the loss of the previous job security.

For better or for worse, this era has led to the Chinese economy becoming globally competitive and has given it the impetus to be what it is today, by acquiring new skills, techniques, capital and ideology. This way, China was able to exploit its economic advantage: having a skilled labor force, but also a competitive one³⁵.

The Average Chinese employee's salary is very low compared to that of Americans or Europeans, and this is because Chinese units set different kinds of standards.

The Chinese market started taking advantage of both quantity and quality of work³⁶. Being the Chinese population the largest in the world, it also has a great Human Resource supply and customers. The concept of Quality refers to the ability of the Chinese labor force to work under extreme conditions, while respecting Hierarchy and strict rules.

These two sides of the Chinese labor force definitely attracted, and still do, foreign companies. But, while the Chinese economy gained its best balance, from the workers' side something had changed: their life standards, needs and aspirations became closer to the Western ones. Moreover, lately, people have also developed a more conscious view of themselves and started caring more for their own rights, as reasonable financial returns, physically and psychologically sustainable working hours and environment.

Nowadays, HRM practices have changed and expanded even more: the recruitment and training of foreign human capital have become a basis for the Chinese government to promote their economic competitiveness internationally. Also the structure of the organizations has gone through a shaping process, taking its basis from Confucian values, as respect (jìng, 敬), in particular filial respect (xiào, 孝), respect towards elders and superiors (tì, 悌), loyalty (zhōng, 忠), reliability (xìn, 信) and the observance of rites and social conventions (lǐ, 礼). By looking at these, we can easily understand how the organizations are structured today and why. As all these values were taken into account in every

³⁵ M. Boisot, John Child, *Organizations as Adaptive Systems in Complex Environments: The Case of China*, Vol. 10, No. 3, Special Issue: Application of Complexity Theory to Organization Science, 1999, pp.26.

³⁶ J.B Barney, D.N. Clark, *Resource-Based Theory: Creating and Sustaining Competitive Advantage*, University Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 45.

aspect of people’s life, also the work culture in China was traditionally very hierarchical, meaning that the boss sees the employees as those who have to fully adapt to his requests.

In fact, according to Hofstede’s “Dimensions of Distance” (PDI), China scores 80 in “Power Distance”, as shown in Figure 1. The dimension of Power Distance assumes that individuals in societies are not equal, and expresses the attitude of the culture towards these inequalities amongst people. It is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions, organizations and society of a specific country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.

Based on the country’s ranking of power distance, China can be defined as a society that believes that inequalities amongst people are acceptable. Therefore, there is a great hierarchical structure inside organizations: subordinate-superior differences in relationships tend to be underlined. Moreover, this often links to no defense against power abuse by superiors.

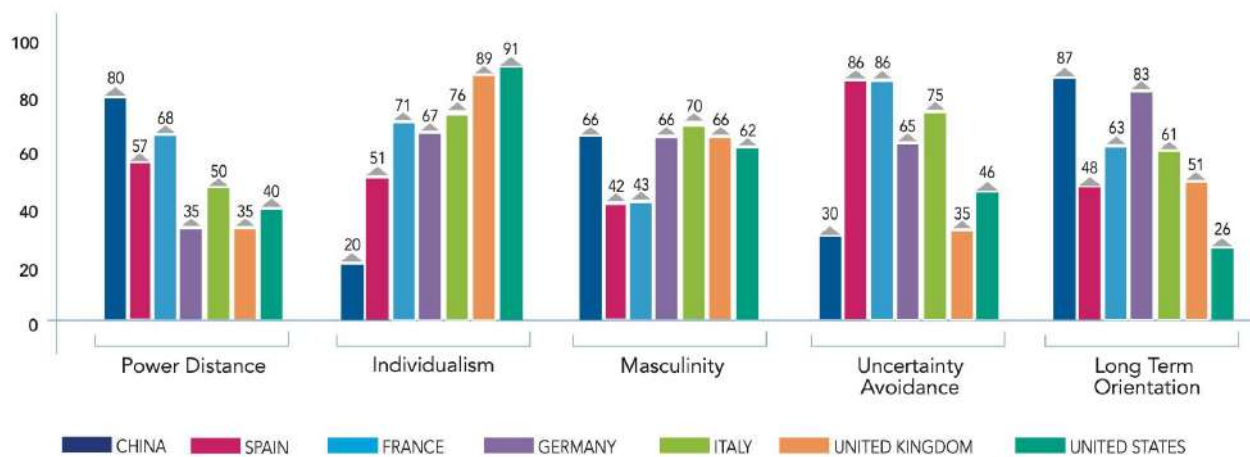


Figure 1 – Cultural Comparison among Seven Countries

Source: Hofstede Insights

To recap, the Confucian values, the devotion toward work, the development of China’s economy and the position it occupies now in the international market, the quality and quantity focus and the acceptance of inequalities, led China through a process that took it to the current HRM practices, and also to the spread of the 996 culture.

Since the advent of the 21st century, many aspects have changed within HRM practices in China. In particular, education, employee training and the recruitment of foreign human capital have become key aspects in the current Chinese system, being the government's primary goals to increase the competitiveness of Chinese companies. However, together with the discovery of new aspects and skills, the whole HRM system is facing new problems and contradictions, as the ones we are here analyzing.

CHAPTER 3

Introduction to the survey and trend analysis among the world's economic powers

The data reported in the previous chapter provide evidence of a work culture that is far removed from that envisaged by Chinese norms and laws. As reported above, COVID-19 has led to a further weakening of working conditions within companies, leaving even more room for debate on the human rights of employees.

As anticipated, not all companies subject their staff to such work pressure, and not all employees are forced into inhuman working hours, but for the reasons mentioned previously, unfortunately these characteristics are quite widespread in China nowadays.

Work pressure often does not only result from long working hours, but coincides with the quality of the hours spent at work. Many workers are dissatisfied with the way their working days unfold, regardless of the hours they are subjected to: in many cases, a lack of motivation, as we mentioned in the previous chapters, and a lack of engagement can be the primary reasons for anxiety and stress in the workplace. It is obvious, however, that the longer the working hours are, the less time people have to get distracted, de-stress and regain their energy.

We therefore have several variables that can influence the working life of employees, and it is important to analyse as many as possible to find a more concrete and reliable key.

In order to report the situation as truthfully and topically as possible, I decided to use primary research, carried out through a survey, in addition to secondary data, collecting questions on various aspects related to the topic.

The goal of the survey is to collect responses from a sample audience of company employees and to actually understand whether the data correspond to the results of the previously reported research.

The survey aims to analyse the relationship between working hours and employee's productivity and efficiency, which then affects the entire company and its outcomes. It should also be remembered that the trends derived from the results of these job searches are also an important social index, thus shedding light on a much larger topic.

However, to see what the actual working condition is in China today, it is crucial to compare it to other countries that are on the same economic level. The socio-cultural trends of a country, in such a globalised world, never develop in isolation, but are often interdependent with those of others, especially when they have great contacts. In order to understand whether the phenomenon analysed is peculiar to Chinese companies alone or whether it has developed globally, and thus may be linked to other factors such as economic interdependence and growth, increasing demand, globalisation and

so on, I decided to extend the analysis to two other major global economic giants: United States and the European Union. Together with the Chinese one, these two economies are constantly developing, and it is important to compare the socio-cultural context in which they develop and to analyse the resulting corporate culture.

This kind of analysis is interesting also because data from several countries can provide insight into whether there are similar patterns across the world, and so the need to look beyond specific national explanations and solutions when devising policy. Moreover, the existence of differences across countries can help shed light on possible national determinants of job quality and support mutual learning between countries.

3.1 Job quality across the three countries

Job quality is increasingly recognised as a major policy concern. It is the main matter of the ILO's "Decent Work Agenda" and the "European Union's Quality of Work" policies.

For employees and for their companies, high quality jobs bring benefits, while low quality jobs bring many costs. The policy goals of better job quality, decent work and a high level of worker welfare can be supported by reliable data on working conditions.

Working conditions surveys quantify the extent to which workers are exposed to certain risks at work and the resources available to them to soften these risks, making it possible to analyse different work situations, and enable researchers to examine the possible effects of changes on the job quality while monitoring progress in working conditions. Comparable data are needed to support the development of evidence-based policies on job quality and are the basis to search, find and understand the major trends, by looking at how these spread and develop from time to time.

There are three main surveys used to analyze job quality in Europe, United States and China, that are prior to the Pandemic, and will therefore be used here as reference for the pre-COVID period. As the pandemic brought about enormous social changes, particularly in the world of business and work, it is also important to provide an analysis comparing the period before and after it.

These surveys have been collected and analyzed by ILO and Eurofound in the *Working conditions in a global perspective*³⁷ report, and are: European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), American Working Conditions Survey (AWCS) and China Urban Labour Survey (CULS).

³⁷ Eurofound and International Labour Organization, *Working conditions in a global perspective*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, and International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2019.

For Europe, the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) provides comparable data, while the data for the US were also gathered using a questionnaire that take inspiration from the EWCS. In China, the China Urban Labor Survey was conducted in six large cities (Shanghai, Wuhan, Shenyang, Fuzhou, Xian and Guangzhou) by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and also derived from the EWCS, but it lacks some basic variables related to working conditions, such as physical risks and work–life balance. For this reason, the Social Status of Women in China Survey (SSWCS), that includes data on selected job quality dimensions, including physical and environment, is used to complement the findings of the CULS.

The report analyses seven dimensions of job quality: physical environment, work intensity, working time quality, social environment, skills and development, prospects, and earnings. Even if there were many important differences across countries on these dimensions, there were also important similarities.

- Frequent exposure to physical risks.
- Intensive work, as tight deadlines and high-speed work, are experienced by almost one-third of workers in the EU, and half in the US.
- Across the countries, at least 10% of workers work during their free time and long hours often come with intense work.
- Great part of workers reports a supportive social environment at work.
- Regarding prospects, job insecurity is of concern across many countries
- Women earn significantly less than men and are overrepresented at the lowest end of the earnings distribution.

The most used measurements of working conditions involve remuneration, working hours and contractual arrangements, but working conditions surveys can address many other important issues, such as job quality (e.g. physical environment, social environment, skills and discretion, work intensity, working time quality, prospects and earnings) and the related risks. Working conditions surveys aim at capturing the “real” work activities that people are carrying out, rather than what is reported in their job description³⁸. Intensive work is experienced by a third of workers in the EU countries and by half of workers in the USA, and 25-40% of workers report to perform jobs that require an unsustainable emotional commitment. Moreover, in all countries, at least 10% of employees declare being forced to work in their free time. Long working weeks (defined as 48 hours and more) remain frequent around countries. Reports from the pre-pandemic period, as in Figure 2,

³⁸ Eurofound and International Labour Organization, *Working conditions in a global perspective*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, and International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2019, pp. 3-12.

point out long weekly hours range from 15% of workers in the EU, 19% of workers in the US, 41% of workers in the six surveyed metropolitan areas of China³⁹.

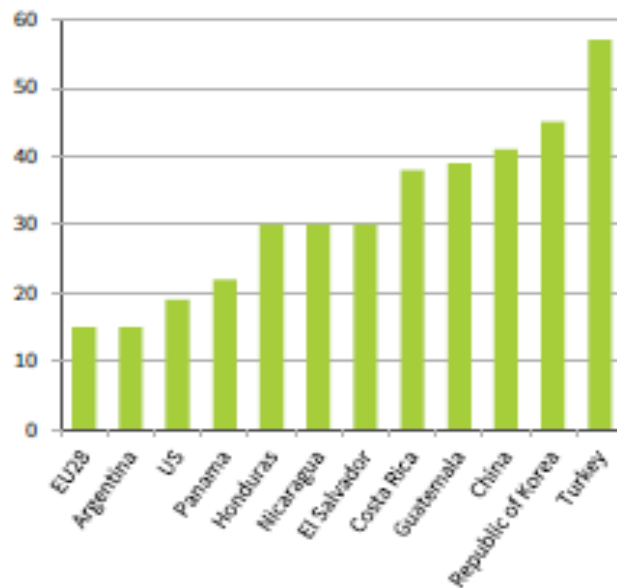


Figure 2: Incidence of working over 48 hours, by country or region (%)

Source: *Working Conditions in a Global Perspective*

What emerges from the research is that, even though there are many differences between these countries, they all have in common the high exposure to psycho-physical dangers or damage of workers. The trend in working hours varies from industry to industry, and can be constrained by several variables, but according to the statistics analysed here, work-related stress is shared by most workers today. According to many theories, this phenomenon could be a consequence of the pandemic, but actually the problem is not that recent. As stated by the report *Working Conditions on a Global Perspective* (2019), the current situation has been driven by years of attacks on working and wage conditions on a global scale, but tends to intensify with the consequences of the pandemic.

The last reports from ILO, from the start of the pandemic onwards, states that too many people are still working excessively long hours around the world, even though average working hours in many developed countries have been trending downward. More than a third of all workers are on the job at least 48 hours per week: “Regular long hours of work remain a serious concern in most of the world today,” the report states. There has been great progress in reducing hours of work in many countries during this period, particularly in countries with advanced economies and especially in Europe, but

³⁹ Eurofound and International Labour Organization, *Working conditions in a global perspective*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, and International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2019, pp. 22-32.

regular long hours of work remain a serious concern in most of the world today, above all in regions such as Asia and the Pacific⁴⁰.

The report shows that in developing countries, many employees have to work long hours because their jobs require them to do so to complete the tasks. Many overemployed workers say they'd prefer to work less, even if that would mean earning less, but are still work long hours because wages are low and they're trying to make ends meet. This is also true for many workers regardless of the country they work in.

The ILO report states that the number of people working more than 48 hours per week decreased early in the pandemic, but then grew up again as the world recovered: while the pandemic was characterized by an increase of remote jobs that gave workers more flexibility, it did not cause a major change in the length of the average workweek in the long term, perhaps in part because some products and services were in high demand. Therefore, although the proportion of workers who regularly work more than 48 hours per week decreased substantially between the fourth quarter of 2019 and the second quarter of 2020, the phenomenon was already changing back to the pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2020 (with some regional variations)⁴¹.

The ILO reports that the average number of working hours per year was higher in the U.S. than in six developed countries used in the study's comparison, many of them from the EU.

The average 40-hour-per-week employee in the U.S. is working 400 and more hours annually, that is the equivalent of 10 more weeks, than employees in Germany for example.

However, the study shows employees in several major developing countries, including China, work more than Americans. In China, average working hours are above 2,100 per year, and those numbers have increased in the past five decades, while in the U.S., workers clock an average of about 1,750 hours per year. Overall, work-life balance is best in Europe compared to the USA and China, where some of the shortest average hours of work per week are found, especially in Northern, Southern and Western Europe⁴².

Trends in average annual hours of work per workers have to be researched and analysed year by year: there are substantial differences in selected developed countries and in selected developing countries in comparison with key developed countries. While there is a visible downward trend from the late 1800's through most of the 20th Century in the developed countries, before flattening out towards the end of the century or even turning slightly upwards (e.g. the United States), there is much longer hours in developing countries (e.g. China) due to the lack of available data on working hours in there

⁴⁰ ILO, *Working Time and Work-Life Balance Around the World*, Geneva, 2022, pp. 8-9.

⁴¹ Ivi, pp. 21.

⁴² Ivi, pp. 48.

prior to 1950's. Indeed, the average annual working hours per worker actually increased in China as it industrialized before levelling off in the early 21st Century⁴³.

3.2 Quality of work in EU

Comparing the three countries allows us to realise that the situation in China today is not just an isolated case. For reasons already analysed above (such as increasing demand, the interdependence of economies and the tendency to achieve higher and higher goals in shorter timeframes) the high stress and risk of burnout is increasingly expanding in many countries. In Europe, in fact, job quality surveys reveal a similar scenario to that in China in terms of employees' perceptions of work.

For a more detailed understanding of the phenomenon it is interesting to compare data from the pre-COVID-19 and the current period, to see how the pandemic has led to the development of some trends and the decrease of others.

Going in chronological order, important data from the pre-pandemic period are provided by the 2015 edition of the EWCS relating to the Member States of the EU. The survey interviewed nearly 36,000 workers in the EU28 about their work and the factors shaping it. Figure 3 presents information on weekly working hours and their dispersion across the EU's different Member States in during the period: The grey box represents the interquartile range (i.e. 50% of the workers fall within the box limits) and the lines (whiskers) represent the 5th and 95th percentiles.

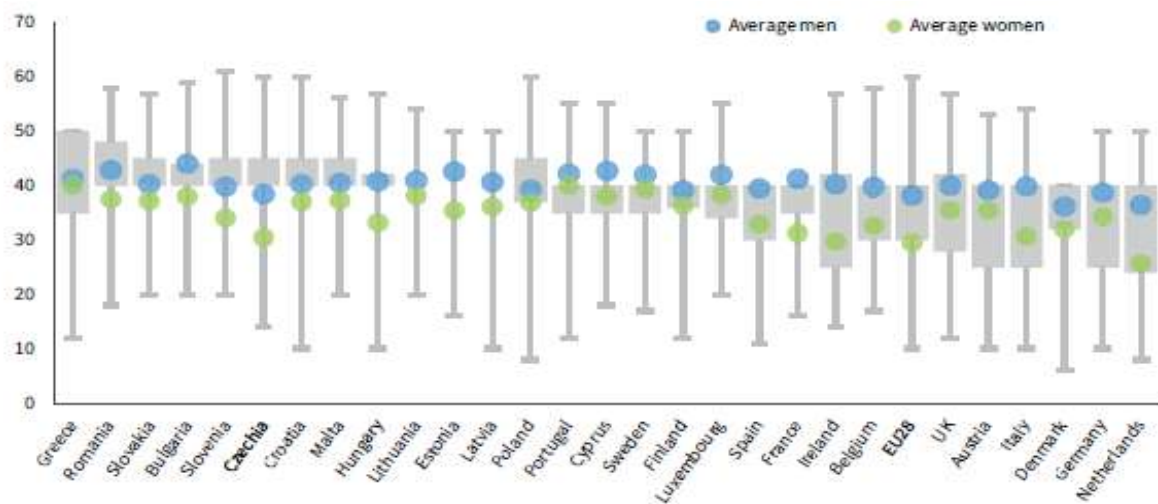


Figure 3- Usual weekly working hours, by country and sex, EU28

Source: "Working Conditions in a Global Perspective"

⁴³ ILO, *Working Time and Work-Life Balance Around the World*, Geneva, 2022, pp. 125

The survey data on working hours show that about 15% of workers in the EU28 used to work on average long weekly hours (48 hours or more per week). According to the Working Time Directive 2003/88/EC, workers must have a daily rest period of 11 consecutive hours in every 24 hours. Around 23% of workers declared that at least once in the month prior to the survey they had taken a break of less than 11 hours between the end of one working day and the start of the next one. In considering working time, it is still important to take into account differences between men and women, indeed, men are more likely to have longer paid working hours and work to “atypical” schedules than women. Women, on the other hand, tend to have more regular working hours and are more likely to have their working hours set by their employer.

In terms of flexibility to suit a worker’s needs, for the 65% of workers surveyed in the EU28 it is easy to take an hour or two off work during working day to take care of personal matters.

Related to working hours, an important topic is that of Work–life balance: according to the EWCS, over four workers in five (82%) reported a good fit between their work and their family or social commitments, with just 18% reporting a poor fit. As we can image, employees who work long hours are almost four times less likely than other workers to report a good fit between working hours and social commitments, and are also more likely to say that their health and safety is at risk because of work, as well as feeling exhausted at the end of the working day⁴⁴.

On the other hand, data from a more recent period, 2021-2022, and thus consequent to the spread of the pandemic, reveal an increasing trend of burnout among employees. In fact, according to EU-OSHA's OSH Pulse workers' survey, “*Occupational Safety and Health after the pandemic*”, more than four out of ten workers (44 %) say that work-related stress has increased as a result of the pandemic, and almost half of the respondents (46 %) stated that they are exposed to high time pressure or overwork⁴⁵.

The COVID-19 crisis affected workers in many ways, but above all in terms of time spent on paid work. Some worked more hours than required or expected; others worked fewer hours or even stopped working. As shown in Table 1, most of the workers whose working hours were stated in the contract worked the same hours (64% of women and 60% of men), while only 6% (of both women and men) reported working fewer hours than stated in the contract (Table 1), but a substantial proportion (35% of men and 30% of women) stated that they worked more hours than agreed.

⁴⁴ Eurofound and International Labour Organization, *Working conditions in a global perspective*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, and International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2019, pp. 51-65.

⁴⁵ European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, OSH Pulse, *Occupational safety and health in post-pandemic workplaces*, Flash Eurobarometer, Report, 2020.

	Men	Women	Total
More hours than in contract	35	30	33
Same hours as in contract	60	64	62
Fewer hours than in contract	6	6	6
Total	100	100	100

Table 1- Distribution of employees with working hours stated in their employment contract according to usual hours of work, by gender, EU27 (%)

Source: EWCTS 2021

Much attention has been given to working time, which has been regulated by the EU to ensure the protection of workers from excessively long and atypical working hours. Recently, policy discussions and regulations have addressed the predictability of working hours and the “right to disconnect”: the right of workers not to engage in work-related electronic communications, such as e-mails or messages, outside working hours, that has been identified as one of the main problems of the hybrid-work method.

For many employees, the way they allocated hours individually and at household level to work and non-work-related activities changed greatly: according to great part of them, working from home reduced commuting time. Indeed, these changes in the organisation of working time related to COVID-19 have occurred in the context of longer-term changes in working time, characterised by an increase in the flexibility given to workers with regard to the organisation of working time, but with a greater blurring of the line between working and non-working life. The EWCTS underlines four types of working time that are generally seen as unsocial: regularly working during free time, regularly working at night, working long hours and regularly being required to work at short notice. One in six workers (16%) declared working during their free time several times per week or even more to meet work demands, around one-fifth worked at night regularly, 17% reported working more than 48 hours per week, and 14% of workers had to go to work at short notice. Except for working in one’s free time, men reported more working time demands than women.

Another important matter is having the flexibility to adapt one's working hours: it is good for the well-being of workers and promotes a healthy work-life balance, while also improving commitment and motivation at work. A significant indicator of working time flexibility is the ease with which a person can take an hour or two off for personal affairs. Fortunately, three-quarters of workers found it very easy (33%) or quite easy (43%) to take an hour or two off during working days to take care of personal or family matters, good indicator for working time flexibility, while 11% found it very difficult and 13% found it quite difficult to do so. In 2021, access to this kind flexibility was highly differentiated by gender: 37% of men were able to take a break very easily, while just 29% of women

were able to do so. This gender gap exists for all age groups and was widest, by 10 percentage points, for workers aged 56 and over⁴⁶.

In particular, the study conducted by “Workday Addressing Burnout Risk” in 2022 analysed how the Burnout risk has evolved since 2021 in many countries, specifically in Europe, taken into account as a geographical area. In Europe the risk of Burnout remains high, and especially six countries have seen an increase in burnout risk, while four others have shown an improvement. Among the first is the United Kingdom, with 41% of employees exposed to the burnout risk, up 4% from last year, in second position is France (39%), which has seen a decrease in the burnout risk of 7% since 2021. The Netherlands is in third position with 33%, although down 5%, while Norway saw a 9% year-on-year increase to 20%. Denmark grew by 3%, which continues to be the tail end (11%). In contrast, German employees saw their burnout risk drop by 15%⁴⁷.

According to “Bain & Company”, Italian workers under 35 are the most stressed in Europe: 40% are not satisfied with their jobs. They claim to suffer from anxiety, to be constantly tired and unproductive, and to manifest various symptoms related to job burnout. This happens especially in the wake of the pandemic, which 58% cent of Italians believe has represented a break with the past, highlighting the need to completely review the relationship between private and professional life. In a study conducted last year, Indeed showed that millennials and Generation Z workers present higher burnout rates than anyone else, at 59% and 58% respectively, which in some cases have even led to resignations. In 2021 the Ministry of Labor recorded 2 million voluntary resignations by employees, 43.2% of which are young people⁴⁸.

Although the situation in Europe seems to be better than in other countries of the world, we still have evidence that in recent years many workers are experiencing increasingly more work-related stress, and this may be largely attributable to the effects of the pandemic.

3.3 Quality of work in USA

As stated above, there have also been major changes in Europe as a result of the Pandemic outbreak in the world. We can also see common trends, especially with regard to burnout, in the USA, and we can therefore say that certain labor imbalances are not only spreading in China.

⁴⁶ Eurofound, *Working conditions in the time of COVID-19: Implications for the future*, European Working Conditions Telephone Survey 2021 series, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg , pp. 35-43

⁴⁷ Forbes, *In aumento il rischio burnout nel mondo del lavoro: quali sono i settori più stressanti*, www.forbes.it/2022/12/16/allarme-burnout-lavoro-stress, Accessed 21 Dec. 2022.

⁴⁸ Bain & Company, *The Working Future*, www.bain.com, Accessed 21 Sept. 2022.

Pre-COVID data from the American Working Conditions Survey (AWCS), which got responses from over 3,000 people, shows that work was intense for many, with long hours, long working days, atypical working hours, and a high pace of work even before the pandemic.

The US has a workforce of 154 million and is one of the largest labor markets in the world. Although the country remains centrally positioned in the global economy, its labor market has experienced great troubles since the economic crisis in 2008 and this still have effects on the employment, pay and working conditions of American workers today.

The primary regulation governing working conditions in the US, applying to most, but not all Workers, is the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA): it sets a minimum wage, requires payment for overtime for any additional work beyond 40 hours per week, and restricts the employment of children. The FLSA does not impose limits on the number of hours an employer can require a worker to work, although some states have imposed their own limits, therefore if a worker refuses to work overtime, their employer can cut their pay, change their job responsibilities, or even dismiss them.

Work intensity is, as anticipated, one of the most important reference to analyse for understanding the working quality conditions. In the US, nearly half of all workers reports working at high speed or to tight deadlines (46% and 48% respectively) at least three-quarters of the time. The frequency of high working speeds is similar at small and large enterprises, but workers at large organisations are more likely to work to tight deadlines than workers at small organisations (57% compared to 37%). Moreover, 9% of workers feel that they do not have enough time to do their job, suggesting that the work environment is often stressful and mentally negative for them.

Working time quality is another main feature: in the US, a standard working week is between 35 and 40 hours, and the majority of both male and female workers fall within this range. However, women are more likely to work fewer than 35 paid hours per week than men, and men are more likely to work more than 40 paid hours per week.

Large enterprises are much less likely to employ workers for less than 35 hours a week than small and medium-sized, or micro (10% in comparison to 23% and 30% respectively). 19% of US workers report working very long hours (48 or more), but while the distribution of hours provides some insight into a typical working week, there are times when very long working days are required: therefore, the survey also asks workers whether they work in excess of 10 hours a day at least once a month. Throughout the US, 55% work such long days, and men are much more likely to do so than women (62% compared to 47%).

Just over one-third of US workers (36%) have their working hours arranged by their employer, 11% can choose from a selection of fixed schedules set by their employer, 39% can adapt their working hours within certain limits and 14% can fix their work schedules independently. Larger enterprises

are more likely to let employees choose between different schedules than at small enterprises.

Nearly half of US workers report working in their free time to meet their work demands, far exceeding those who report not having enough time to meet their work demands, suggesting that there is an acceptance of this situation within US workplace culture.

A flexible job can help workers balance their work and personal life: for over one-quarter of workers it is either not difficult at all or not too difficult to do this, with professionals the most likely to report greater flexibility (39%), and gender differences regarding flexibility are minimal⁴⁹.

With the advent of the pandemic, the general stress level of employees rose. Many data from the 2020 onwards confirm this trend and reveal a worrying scenario:

- According to a recent survey by “Slack’s Future Forum”, tracking this data since May of 2021, some 43 percent of US office workers “feel burned out at work”⁵⁰.
- Data from Gallup related to 2022 show that a third of all workers always or very often feel burned-out at work⁵¹.
- Recent data from Glassdoor, where employees anonymously review the companies they work for, shows mentions of burnout are up more than 40% this year compared with 2019⁵².
- A survey by business think tank Conference Board of HR executives from this year stated that 77% of companies had seen an increase in the number of burned out employees, up 35% from September 2020⁵³.

These reports about burnout show that it is getting worse: additionally, while the emergency phase of the pandemic might be over, COVID-19 remains a concern and a disruptive force in the world, even for those privileged enough to have spent a large part of the pandemic working from home.

In the USA, especially in the last two years, a great number of workers gave up their jobs, often doing so silently with no possible alternative. As already stated, the phenomenon tends to spread and intensify in many parts of the world, now qualifying as a global phenomenon.

It is called "Great Resignations", or “Big Quit”, and it is pushing millions of workers leaving their jobs all of a sudden: the cause is burnout.

⁴⁹ Eurofound and International Labour Organization, *Working conditions in a global perspective*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, and International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2019, pp. 103-114

⁵⁰ Future Forum, *Research and Data: Winning the war for talent in the post-pandemic world*, <https://futureforum.com/2021/06/15/future-forum-pulse>, Accessed 19 Jan. 2023.

⁵¹ Gallup, *Workplace: U.S. Employee Engagement Needs a Rebound in 2023*, www.gallup.com/workplace/468233/employee-engagement-needs-rebound-2023.aspx, Accessed 29 Jan. 2023.

⁵² R. Molla, Burnout was supposed to get better. It Hasn't, Vox.com, www.vox.com/recode/2022/10/20/23413380/burnout-remote-work-economy-quits-slack-future-forum, Accessed 28 Jan. 2023.

⁵³ The Conference Board, *Difficulty Finding and Retaining Office Workers Skyrockets*, www.conference-board.org/press/fourth-survey-reimagined-Workplace, Accessed 23 Jan. 2023.

Although there are many conflicting thoughts regarding the causes of this big quit, numerous empirical researches indicate the psycho-physical exhaustion of workers as its main cause. This is not only a consequence of long working hours and the intensity of work rhythms, but also the result of a salary that does not give the chance to people to support their own families or just themselves.

Therefore, the phenomenon does not result from "shortage of labor", but instead results from the overall bad working conditions of millions of employees, who cannot undertake it anymore⁵⁴.

After two years of pandemic, workers are even more worried on both their financial stability and on adapting to an ever-changing work environment. 7 out of 10 said the pandemic has made them more concerned about their finances, up 5% since last fall according to the 2022 Prudential's newest Pulse of the American Worker Survey: *A Third Year Begins — Life and Work in the Pandemic Era*. With a backdrop of economic uncertainty, this concern seems greatly influence the way people are thinking about their careers and shaping their life.

Of the 22% of workers who changed jobs during the pandemic, one-third said they accepted a pay cut in exchange for a job that offered better work-life balance, and 1 out of 5 workers surveyed said they would take an average pay cut of 10% if it meant better work-life balance or that they could work for themselves. Indeed, more than half (56%) of workers said they considered, or would consider, prioritising job stability over salary. As further evidence of the desire for stability, half of the workers surveyed said they wanted to work for a single company, a great increase of 19% since the last question asked in an August 2019 from Pulse survey.

Interestingly, 62% reported being seeking employment at a midsize or large, established company, while only 2% of people were looking for a job at a startup, also indicating an increased desire for the stability and benefits larger companies may offer.

Moreover, 68% of workers surveyed stated they expect a pay raise soon, and nearly half expect to be promoted between now and the end of 2024. Just 52% of workers said they will look for a new job if their expectations are not met, suggesting that worker confidence remains as the Great Resignation continues. Almost a quarter (22%) have switched jobs during the pandemic.

Among the surveyed people, 45% stated they feel more free to ask employers for benefits and accommodations they would need to manage work and life, and a quarter have already done so.

Another important pandemic's signature is the remote work: as companies return to the worksite, many workers are shifting to a hybrid work model, and while 72% of workers trying it say it is going better than they expected, some have concerns. Under half of hybrid workers say the new model may

⁵⁴ I. Gjergji, *Il burnout porta alle dimissioni di massa: lavorare è diventato insostenibile*, Il Fatto Quotidiano, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2021/10/22/il-burnout-porta-alle-dimissioni-di-massa-lavorare-e-diventato-insostenibile/6364327/>, Accessed 24 Dec. 2022.

make it harder for them to advance in their careers (47%) and learn new skills (45%). Moreover, 57% of hybrid workers say that the experience has increased their stress level in returning to worksites: 36% are finding it hard to maintain productivity levels, and just over a quarter of hybrid workers say it is difficult to engage with colleagues who work remotely. The Pulse survey also found that feelings of burnout among managers are high, as they assume a large part of the responsibility for following employees in remote and hybrid work. While 6 out of 10 people said it also forced them to prioritize their mental health over their career, 44% of managers with remote staff are worried the pandemic caused them to lose control over their own career development⁵⁵.

At such a time of work-related stress, it is clear that for many employees, work interests are changing, and work stability and daily serenity are becoming the top priorities, and this denotes an important social aspect as many employees may not seek or accept greater job opportunities.

3.4 Additional data on the work quality in pre-COVID China

As anticipated in the 2nd paragraph of this chapter, the CULS, together with the SSWCS, provide important data about the main Chinese cities from the period prior to the pandemic.

The questions in the CULS concerning working time quality examine the number of hours that respondents spend at work per day and per week, and ask whether they are able to influence or choose their work schedules. More than 30% of workers have long working weeks, regardless of sector. In 2016, more men than women worked long working weeks of more than 48 hours (44% compared to 37%).

People having control over their working schedules is another dimension of working time quality. For 48% of workers, the working time arrangements are determined by the employer, a quarter of workers are able to adapt their working hours or modify their schedules, and 16% set their working hours independently. Employees of large enterprises and SMEs are more likely to have their working time set by their employer, while more than half of workers in microenterprises are able to set their own work schedules.

Moreover, nearly 45% of respondents to the CULS claim that their work pace is set by their colleagues, two-thirds attribute it to the direct demands of consumers and just around half of workers declare that their pace is controlled by their boss.

⁵⁵ Pulse of the American Worker Survey, *A Third Year Begins: Life and Work in the Pandemic Era*, Prudential Financial, 2022.

According to the third SSWCS, 35% of Chinese workers report that they are satisfied or completely satisfied with their career path. The differences between men and women on this statement are small, but there are important differences in terms of occupation: managers (22%), professionals (14%) and technicians (15%) have the largest proportions of workers who report that they are completely satisfied with their career development.

In the SSWCS, workers were asked if they had ever experienced having no work-life balance and time for family due to their job. Among demographic and occupational characteristics, women are more likely to experience work–life conflicts, and that is because women still take care of domestic work and family in China. As stated before, satisfaction with working time has a positive effect on work–life balance, while those who are satisfied with their work intensity and working conditions experience less conflict⁵⁶.

Today, with the consequences of the COVID-19, levels of stress and burnout are higher than normal, and more than 80% of office workers reporting working longer hours said they felt a very narrow line between work and personal life. With increasingly stressful conditions, many Chinese employees would be willing, where they had the financial opportunities to do so, to settle for lower salaries and lesser roles in exchange for more serenity and work-life balance. The Tang Ping movement gives evidence of this trend, especially among young people.

3.5 Common trends

Although US, EU and China data reported so far differ in some respects, such as the working hours' curve and how it has evolved since 2020, many trends that have developed as a consequence of the pandemic can be considered common, some positive and some negative. Among those that most affect the health of employees, we highlight three in particular:

- In general, within companies, employees have started to have more flexibility with regard to the division of their working hours and organisation of tasks. This does not necessarily coincide with a decrease in working hours, but simply leaves more room for a redistribution of work. The reason for this increased flexibility lies above all in the new ways of working, which have allowed work to adapt to the pandemic crisis: working from home and hybrid work. A large proportion of the workers interviewed in the US, EU and China surveys stated that they feel continuously “on call” working in these two modes: the line between work and private life is becoming increasingly blurred. By working

⁵⁶ Eurofound and International Labour Organization, *Working conditions in a global perspective, Publications Office of the European Union*, Luxembourg, and International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2019, pp. 71-78.

from home, the employees surveyed noticed greater freedom to take time for themselves or for their home and family, but by not having to leave the office, and by taking more breaks than when at work, the working day becomes longer. Both managers and colleagues themselves feel free to write emails and make work requests at times of the day when they would not have done so before. When a person leaves the office, the working day is in most cases automatically considered to be over, but this is not the case if one has already been at home all day. So, while employees are given more flexibility, there is actually less actual time off from work.

- Another phenomenon that has been expanding more and more in recent years in the countries under consideration is the tendency towards job burnout. The causes of this phenomenon are to be found in both the consequences of the pandemic and the exponential economic growth of these countries, and at the same time in the post COVID-19 recovery to which they are aiming. Generally speaking, people's stress increased greatly during the early stages of pandemic-related restrictions, which then reflected and evolved with the return to the workplace, that many craved for, but to whose rhythms so many had become disaccustomed. Companies in particular, especially in the early stages of reopening, did all they could to recover financially, and employees were faced with increased rhythms in order to achieve major goals. On the other hand, the increasing demand for products and services has put a great amount of workers, especially in certain industries (e.g. technology, above all in China), under stress. A greater number of employees are subjected to high levels of stress which, as we stated earlier, only decreases their willingness and motivation, and thus their productivity. Burnout in many cases relates to work intensity and tight deadlines, rather than to extremely long working hours, and also to the way the employee experiences his or her working environment and the performance of tasks.

- Related to the previous phenomenon is another important peculiarity common to the most stressed employees interviewed in the above surveys: the desire of many to prefer greater job serenity and stability to a higher salary. Indeed, it seems that employees' ambition is waning in the face of these high levels of stress and job instability, with many stating that they would rather aspire to a lower salary than they receive, but getting a better work-life balance. Obviously, this depends on the economic availability of these people, who often cannot afford to make these work choices. This change of interests within one's career can in some cases lead to a decrease in motivation and commitment to one's work, and is indicative of major social changes.

The three aspects listed above, which, as we have stated, are only some of the major ones, reflect negatively first and foremost on the life of the employees, but consequently also on the entire company organisation and finally on society. Stress, low motivation and all the behaviors that can result from this also have a great influence on all colleagues and the people who manage them or are

managed by them, leading to a dry working environment.

Investigating the influence these internal factors have on company organisation is precisely the starting point of my survey, for which I took working hours as the basis of the analysis. The survey therefore aims to analyse these and their consequences within Chinese companies, using a direct comparison with other economic powers. In fact, while it is true that working hours are only one of the aspects that influence the quality of work and the health of employees, it is also true that in China, as we saw in chapter two, these are extremely impactful on people's lives, and therefore represent an important basis for investigation. 996 is still a widespread phenomenon within Chinese companies, still in the media spotlight for the protection of workers' rights. Despite the fact that with the pandemic and the latest world events there has probably been a decline in attention in this regard, even today news about burnout crises and even deaths and suicides reach us from China. Furthermore, from the research carried out and reported in the previous pages on this topic, we deduce that despite the fact that in many cases employee malaise and high stress levels are also reached due to other aspects of poor work quality, long working hours still pose a threat to many. My aim is therefore to better understand the extent to which working hours, and the resulting consequences for employees, influence the entire company organisation, or whether it is actually other aspects of work quality that influence it the most.

As explained in the next chapter, for this research I used targeted questions that could cover as much as possible every focal aspect of the topic, thus trying to extract from the interviewees a point of view that is as direct and truthful as possible. The order of the questions was also an important junction for me, as it served as a path of reflection for the respondents and to make them better understanding the focus. Lastly, it is interesting to analyse the way in which the answers were collected and the way in which the audience to be surveyed was sought and identified, which gave me further food for thought on the subject.

CHAPTER 4

The influence of working hours on company's organization

In this chapter, we will take a concrete look at the primary research I used for my analysis and at its goal, with a special focus on the method of collecting responses, the target audience involved and the description of the questions asked to the people interviewed. I will then analyse the results of the survey, and make a comparison between the data of the countries it was addressed to, by comparing it with the data reported in the previous chapters, in particular in the third, thus obtaining a more precise picture of the subject.

The starting point of my research, *The influence of working hours on company's organization*⁵⁷, is indeed the great connection that exists between the personal lives of employees, and the way they feel within the work environment, and the functioning of the entire corporate organization. The environment that people find within a company really affects how they feel, both at work and in their personal lives. If human resources do not feel well in their working environment, feel under pressure and do not have the necessary personal time, they will certainly not give their best. But since people are the main and most important resource of a company, this will ultimately determine the success or failure of it.

The reason why I decided to carry out this type of survey is to investigate the extent to which people are subjected to the overworking culture in China, and thus to ascertain among the respondents how many employees actually have their working hours set beyond the regulations. On the basis of this, the focus is then to understand through the responses what the consequences of the Chinese 996 phenomenon, analysed in detail in Chapter 2, or long working weeks are within the companies. As we have seen, within many companies very long working hours are synonymous of higher productivity and quality, but in reality studies dedicated to work and health show that it is quite the opposite: after a certain number of hours, the resource loses concentration and its productivity drops drastically, and in the long run this affects daily productivity. This research is therefore focused on the issue of working hours and work intensity and their relationship with employee's productivity and efficiency, which then affects the entire business and its outcomes.

As mentioned in advance, the aim of the survey is to collect responses from a sample of company employees, and to understand their point of view on the topic examined in order to then actually understand whether the data correspond to the results of the research previously analysed. In order to obtain a more complete investigation, as specified in the first paragraph of the previous chapter, I

⁵⁷ Link to the survey: <https://forms.gle/hrydVEcU154tCQ6x9>

have compared China, the United States and the European Union, with the aim of understanding whether the phenomenon analysed is peculiar to Chinese companies alone or whether it has developed globally.

For the collection of trends and data on the influence of working hours on business organisation in China, we make use of two main references: a temporal one, i.e. the pandemic outbreak, and a spatial one, i.e. the other two economic powers examined. These two help us to position the Chinese phenomenon more precisely in space and time, and to understand how the same dynamics have developed in other periods and in other places. The comparison is useful for us to understand what certain data depend on, but also to predict how they might hypothetically develop in the future.

The methods I used to collect the answers, as well as the channels used to reach the audience, are two important aspects characterising the research. Since the survey is based on information that is quite personal and sensitive to the corporate culture, it was necessary to use certain ways rather than others, and this leads to interesting insights into the topic.

Furthermore, in the following paragraphs, the questions raised in the survey will be explained in more detail: each of them has a specific function, and the order in which they are arranged served as a guide for the people interviewed to help them well understanding the meaning, triggering deeper consideration in them, in order to provide answers that are as truthful and authentic as possible.

Finally, having identified certain trends in the previous chapters that characterise China, but also the US and EU, it will be interesting to see the extent to which the data match up, and to examine why some of them may be discordant.

The survey, having been conducted between late 2022 and early 2023, provides us with answers relating to a period when the crucial phases of the pandemic are hopefully over, and may therefore also be useful as a comparison with previously reported pre-COVID data. However, we should remember that the effects of the pandemic are still very visible, especially in countries such as China, where restrictive measures are still in place and periods of openness and periods of uncertainty alternate continuously.

4.1 Method used for collecting answers

The survey responses were collected by interviewing over 50 employees of Chinese, US and European companies anonymously, balancing the number of respondents per country to obtain a more homogeneous overview.

Initially, in order to have a larger number of respondents, I decided to get in touch with the human

resources department of some companies I had already been in contact with and asked them to forward the survey to their employees. The answers, however, as I had already imagined, were not particularly positive, and the companies were not very willing to provide a certain type of data. The questions asked in the survey are personal questions, and although they are to be given anonymously, they can reveal often uncomfortable company information. Since there are policies and laws on working hours, if these are not followed, it is the employers who will be disfigured. As we have said before, overworking is often the consequence of direct decisions by employees, over which employers usually have no control: it can indeed happen that, in order to complete a task on which they may have been poorly focused during the day, they continue to work outside working hours, without this being imposed by tight deadlines or unacceptable working schedules. Companies might also find it uninteresting and worthless to ask their employees for a survey that diverges from the company's objectives or that does not come from a recognised agency. Therefore, although they had “nothing to hide”, and their employees were working on a regular schedule, it is understandable that they did not want to release their internal information.

I therefore had to rely on other methods, despite the fact that proceeding through companies would have been the quickest way to collect the greater amount of data, while also selecting the companies of interest within the industries of greatest interest. I therefore initially decided to use a word of mouth approach, sending the survey to people I already had contact with and asking them to forward it in turn. However, I then found it interesting, in order to broaden the trajectory a little and have a wider target audience, to post the survey on employee groups on social media or research groups. This was particularly useful for me to reach people from a more mature target group, with different experiences and who might find it interesting on their own initiative to fill out a survey on this precise topic. The answers to the survey are therefore from a wide target group of people, both young and old, and therefore with different corporate positions, which is interesting for associating certain trends. The word-of-mouth method was key to spreading the survey especially in China, where social media is rarely used, but at the same time through social media the survey reached people who had recently worked in China or expatriates currently working there. Social channels were also indispensable to reach employees in US and EU companies outside Italy.

Furthermore, obtaining data directly from companies would certainly have narrowed the circle of the numbers of companies taken into analysis, thus taking into consideration few company cultures and fairly similar results, and consequently narrowed the types of industry they belong to. We have seen, in the previous chapters, that the type of industry can have a great influence on the number of hours worked and the employee's perception of their working environment, as well as on the goals to be achieved and the resulting deadlines and working schedules. In China, in fact, the 996 phenomenon

is in most cases associated with the technology industry, which not surprisingly offers one of the most sought-after services in China itself and worldwide.

4.2 Function and objective of questions

As in any survey, the order in which the questions were asked represents an important junction for its objective, and each question has its own specific importance and function, explained in detail below. My research aims to understand the influence of working hours on the entire company organisation, so the answer does not correspond to a direct association from the respondent, but represents a point of consequence following a series of considerations. It was important for me to guide the respondents through targeted questions in order for them to give a truthful answer that brings together various aspects of working life.

To this purpose, I organised the survey in the following way: first questions referring to the type of company in general, then questions referring specifically to work and working hours, then questions on flexibility and the work-life balance that the job provides, on work intensity and consequent efficiency, and finally more specific questions on the degree of satisfaction with the job and the work consequences of the aspects dealt with. Starting with more general questions, but fundamental for identifying the target audience, the respondent is more comfortable to then openly answer the subsequent more specific and personal questions, which represent the heart of the survey. The questions are basically divided into groups of 3, and each group is addressed to one of the topics listed above, in order to give each of them the right amount of space and to put together several ideas on the same topic. Specifically:

- The first three questions, which are more general, address respectively the country in which the respondent works, the type of industry to which the company belongs and the role held within it. As anticipated, these initial questions are fundamental for identifying the target of the research, and are crucial for then sorting and analysing the answers. As I also wanted to carry out a comparative analysis, through the first question it is possible to distinguish between Chinese, European and US employee groups. The type of industry is, as we have seen, an important source of information for understanding where the trends are developing most, with certain industries being more subject to strenuous working schedules than others, and it is also interesting to see if there are any differences in this regard between the three countries. The role held within the company is another important indicator, as some figures are generally more inclined to have longer working hours, and others more prone to be stressed. Furthermore, the salary received by some roles could certainly increase the degree of job satisfaction, and knowing this information therefore helps to avoid any bias on some

questions.

- The next three questions represent a very important junction for the purpose of the survey, because they provide the basic information for examining the rest of the research: number of hours worked per day, number of hours worked per month, and number of overtime hours per month. As we have seen, the international benchmarks on working hours generally provides for a full-time job 8 hours per day, 40 per week and a maximum of 34 overworking per month (max of 36 in China), and the aim here is precisely to find out in which range the respondents fall. For each of the questions, what is asked is the hourly average, thus on a standard work basis, as tasks can obviously take longer in certain months and weeks, also due to employees' own personal conditions. It is also true that in most industries, certain periods of the year are more labor intensive and require more effort from employees. It should be noted that working over the 48-hour week threshold is considered overworking and is one of the main causes of employee burnout. The following question is related to these three, but refers to the flexibility employees have to change their working schedules. Flexibility is indeed an important indicator of employees' freedom and autonomy, as it gives them the possibility to reorganise themselves according to personal commitments, indeed a significant indicator of working time flexibility is the ease with which an individual can take an hour or two off for personal matters.

- The following three questions go deeper into this topic and require more reflective thinking from the interviewee. Among these, the first one aims to understand whether the employee's working hours and working schedules allow him/her to pursue relationships within the company itself. This question stems from the will to understand whether or not the company culture allows employees to forge relationships and thus enables cohesion, which is definitely important for cooperation and the will to achieve common goals, but fundamental for the creation of a healthy, pleasant and stimulating working environment. This is also aimed at identifying whether there are moments of sharing during the working day, or even sporadic moments of extra-work activities, which are very useful for employees to take a break from routine, while still maintaining the focus, and have a more positive perception of their work and their company, resulting in greater work motivation. The second question among the three is aimed at understanding the extent to which the employee manages, within his or her work schedules, to carry on interpersonal relationships with friends and relatives, and thus outside work. If on one hand it is important to have relationships within the company, it is equally, if not more important to be able to maintain important relationships outside work and above all not to lose them because of it. For many people, the company and work in general become a cobweb that precludes them from having any kind of external relationship, and this happens in two specific cases: when the time to devote to work exceeds the limit, and therefore there is none left to devote to

affections, and when, even if the schedules set by the policies are respected, anxiety, stress and lack of motivation due to work lead to an unwillingness to socialise. The third question encompasses the previous one, but has a much broader meaning: it aims to find out whether the employee has opportunities to have a work-life balance. In this case, the reference is also extended to the enjoyment of hobbies and the development of interests and passions outside work. In fact, it has been observed that leisure activities, or activities aimed at physical and mental health, are of great support for the person's stability and motivation, help to have more and different input and lead the person to work at a higher pace, not to mention that the person then has more creativity and self-esteem. All these positive aspects consequently spill over into the work, and multiplied for each employee lead to greater overall productivity in the company.

- This is followed by three questions on work intensity, which is another focal topic with regard to work-related stress. In many cases, it is not only long working hours that strain people's mental health to the point of burnout, but these consequences can often result from too high work intensity during the day and weeks. Even if the working day is not extremely long, if a person is extremely stressed during his or her eight-hour working day, he or she may begin to lack concentration after a short time or lose focus on life outside of work. In many cases, it also happens that extreme working hours and high work intensity coincide, and in this case the risk of burnout increases significantly. By using these questions, we can in fact assess from which factors stress arises most among the interviewees. In fact, it is asked respectively whether the employee finds himself, due to the amount of work, often working at high intensity, whether high intensity work occurs throughout the day or only at certain times, and what the level of intensity they have in comparison to all other colleagues. Obviously, this question is also asked on a general average, as intensity is also a variable that may increase during certain times of the year or depending on certain tasks, which happens in every company. High intensity occurs daily during any type of job and in almost any field, and it is normal that there are times of the day when it is highest: there are people who tend to be more productive in the morning and people who are more productive in the afternoon, and this is a subjective aspect as concentration levels can vary from employee to employee. If, however, the high intensity is maintained throughout the whole day, for most days, attention and general motivation has a great chance of waning. In addition, if tasks require such a high level of intensity, it is also difficult for people to take breaks during the day, which are necessary to relax and recharge, and then start off again. The awareness of being able to take a break if necessary is also a serenity factor for the employee. The comparison with colleagues is then made because it is interesting in two respects: to understand whether the high intensity is occasional to the role held and the tasks performed by the employee or belongs more to the corporate culture as a whole, and to see what the interviewee's

perception is in this regard.

- Four further questions are then devoted to the topic of work efficiency, which is identified as the consequence of the aspects analysed in the previous questions. The first of these aims more generally at understanding whether working hours lead the employee to be physically and mentally stressed and tired. Indeed, there are jobs that also tend to put a lot of stress on the body because they require movement, but even simply sitting in a chair for the whole day or hunched over in front of a computer can lead to damage such as to the back or legs, or especially to eyesight. In most cases, however, employees do get mentally tired during their working days, and this tiredness is then obviously reflected in their work. In the next question, all previous topics are brought up again, and the employee is asked how, on a scale of 1 to 4, these elements negatively influence work efficiency: long working hours, high work intensity, little free time, negative working environment (intended as the atmosphere that is breathed in the company). As we have seen, in fact, the efficiency and motivation of people can drop for several reasons, depending both on the person, and what this person is more or less influenced by, and on the corporate culture itself, and which aspects are more predominant in it. This question is particularly important for the purposes of the research because it is very explicit in its design and pushes the respondent to a precise consideration, having, however, already addressed the single topics previously. Through these answers we obtain a much more complete picture of the reasons that employees consider to be most negative within the company and that most influence their lives and work productivity. The third of these questions goes a little more specific, asking, again explicitly, how working hours influence the way people themselves and their colleagues work. The expectation is to specifically identify the correlation between the number of hours worked and productivity, which is practically the end point of the research, since it is then the productivity of the individual, added to that of colleagues, that influences the entire company. The fourth question, on the other hand, expands and specifies the previous ones in this group, and in particular the second one, as it asks the same question, but reversing it slightly. The employee is asked how much, by making changes to certain work matters, his or her productivity and performance can improve, and these are: decrease the daily working hours (in case are more than 8), getting more breaks throughout the day, decrease the weekly working hours (in case are more than 40), improve internal communication and cooperation, better re-division of tasks within your department. By means of this question, it is possible to understand whether the aspects that affect the efficiency of the employee are actually influencing the job, and it also adds information on topics that were perhaps considered less important in the second question. Indeed, certain topics may be considered more relevant than others, but it is not necessarily the case that by improving others, the situation in general may not improve in turn.

- Finally, the last question is a closing one, in which the employee is asked in sum, taking all these aspects into consideration, how satisfied he/she is with his/her working hours. A further, more general consideration is then asked about work intensity, efficiency and work-life balance in relation to working hours, and thus based on the previous answers, it can be well understood how much the aspects identified as negative factors (if any) actually impact on the person's working and personal life. Obviously, the lower the employee satisfaction, the lower the motivation, and the greater the negative influence on the company.

In the following paragraphs, the data derived from the answers to these questions will be analysed: China will be the focus of the analysis, and the results obtained will then be compared with those collected in the previous chapters. This will then be followed by a comparison of the data from China with that from the EU and the US, which will be compared likewise with those mentioned in chapter three.

4.3 Data emerging from Chinese companies

Here we will examine data relating to employees of Chinese companies, taking into consideration, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, a small sample population. The aim of the research is, starting from a sample that in comparison to the entire population of Chinese employees is minimal, trying to identify data that can be interpreted as general trends, and thus propose descriptive analysis. It must in any case be remembered that this is the analysis of a sample.

- First of all, the first data obtained on the type of industry is particularly significant: 50 per cent of those interviewed work in the technology industry, despite the fact that the total number of industries selected by the interviewees is 9. We define this as important because, from the information and data reported in the previous chapters, the technology industry is indicated as the sector that is currently most developed, and with the greatest requirement for labour. The demand for these industries has in fact been increasing more and more in recent years, and an increasing number of companies are emerging in this field. We then find, as for the number of employees interviewed, the service industry (11%) followed by education, food, fashion, architecture, manufacturing, training and logistics. It is therefore clear that the data that we will report below will mostly belong to employees of companies in the technology industry, and it is thus interesting to see whether the statements made above in relation to this industry also occur to be true in the population analysed in this survey.

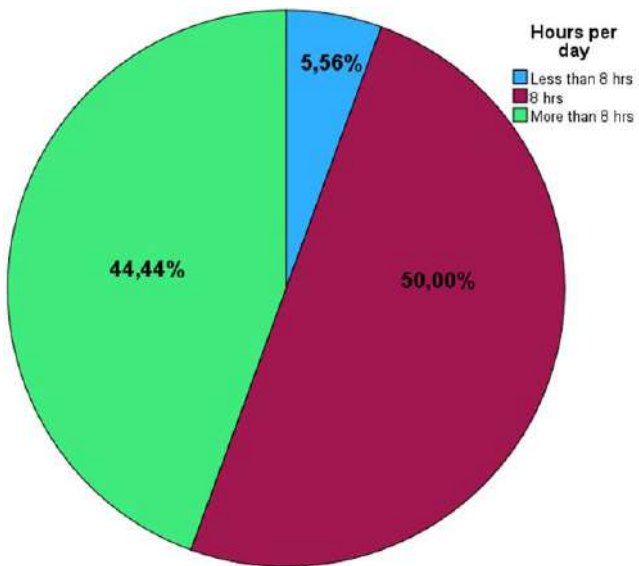


Figure 4a- worked hours per day

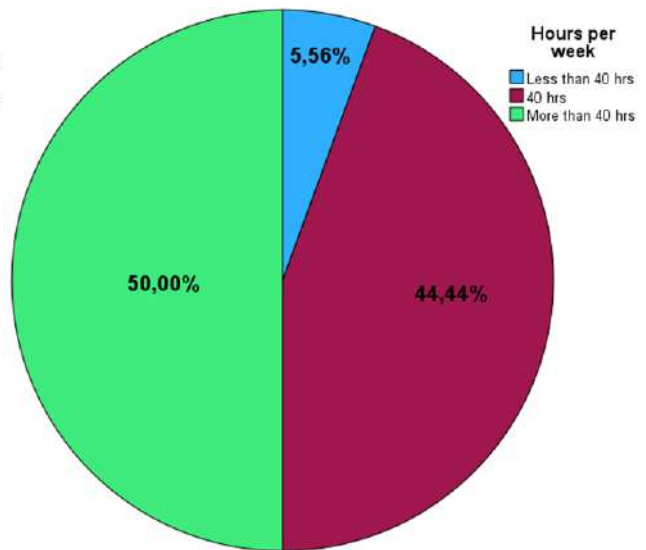


Figure 4b- worked hours per week

- Thus, referring to the working hours, the majority of employees, 50%, state that they work 8 hours per day, perfectly within the legal average, while 44.4% work more than 8 hours per day, and only 5.6% state that they work less than 8 hours, as shown in figure 4a⁵⁸. Amongst these, managers work 71.4% 8 hours per day, and the remaining 28.6% for more, those with an executive role work 33.3% more than 8 hours, and the productive roles with 80% working more than 8 hours per day, as illustrated in figure 5. These data show us that, while on the one hand, the majority of employees have working hours that reflect the standard laid down by policy, there is still a very high number of employees who declare working more hours.

⁵⁸ All the graphs and tables in this chapter, as well as the data analysis, were obtained using the SPSS data analysis programme.

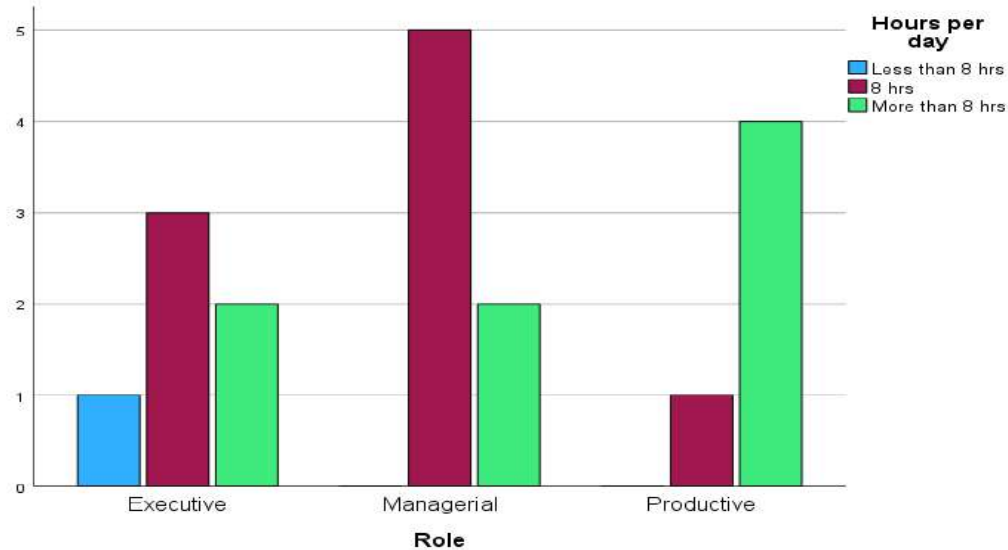


Figure 5- Hours per day divided by roles

The situation varies slightly when it comes to average weekly working hours, where the values are reversed: 50% of the respondents state here that they work for more than 40 hours per week, and 44.4% for exactly 40 hours (Figure 4b). This anomaly may be due to the fact that the required information is on an average basis, so it may happen that although most days people work 8 hours, for one or a couple of days they work slightly more. Here, 42.9% of managers work more than 40 hours per week, while for executive roles and productive roles the percentage remains the same.

Furthermore, with regard to monthly overtime hours, 22.2% of the respondents stated that they do not work any, 66.7% work less than 34 hours, 5.6% work 34 hours and 5.6% work more than 34 hours per month. As shown in Figure 6, only among employees in a productive role are there people who work more than 34 hours of overtime per month, while for all three roles, most people work less than 34 hours.

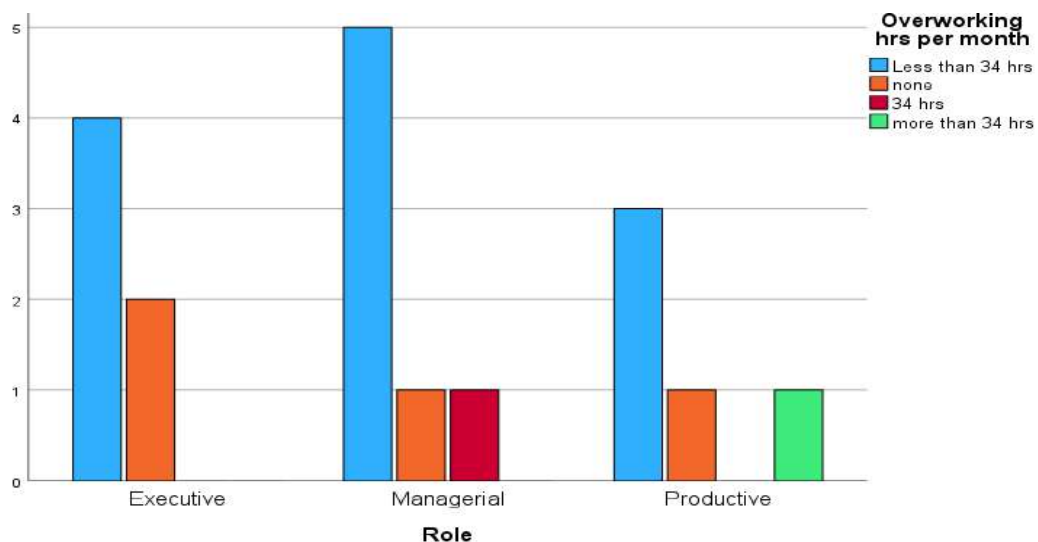


Figure 6- Overworking hours divided by roles

From this first analysis, we can therefore state that in China, between the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023, still about half of the employees work on average more than 40 hours per week and, looking at the average number of people working more than 8 hours per day, we can assume that a large part of these employees can be considered to be in an overworking situation, thus working on average 48 or more hours per week. These answers support the data for pre- and post-2020 China reported in the previous chapter. In fact, the pre-pandemic data stated that 41% of Chinese workers work more than 48 hours per week, while the data for the last two years report that the average working hours are above 2,100 per year. The numbers emerging from the survey actually show a higher percentage incidence for overworking employees and annual hours worked, but as the survey population is much smaller, and almost entirely from the technology sector, we can leave a small margin and imagine that they may coincide.

Another important factor concerning working hours that emerges from the research is that the majority of the employees surveyed (33.3%), a large proportion of whom have a long working week, state that they have minimal flexibility in making changes to working hours, working days (e.g. on a work schedule) and shifts, while only 5.6% state that they have great flexibility. The rest of the answers fall in the middle, as shown in table 2. It is also interesting that most managers and executives report minimal flexibility in this regard.

Attributi standard	Etichetta	Valore	Percentuale
		Flexibility in Changing	
Valori etichettati	1	Great flexibility	5,6%
	2	Some flexibility	22,2%
	3	it depends	22,2%
	4	not much flexibility	16,7%
	5	Very little Flexibility	33,3%

Table 2- flexibility in making changes to working hours, working days and shifts

- We now come to some very important data, concerning the possibility of cultivating relationships and the work-life balance. None of the employees surveyed stated that they do not have the opportunity to nurture relationships with colleagues or employers because of their working hours, and 27.8% of employees said they absolutely do. The majority of the answers fall in the middle, with most people stating that they have the opportunity to do so either quite a lot or sporadically, as shown in figure 7a. This shows that despite the long working days that characterise the weeks of most employees, they still have the opportunity to enjoy time for building relationships within the company, a very important factor as we have said, which also denotes the possibility of being able to take breaks

during working hours or to join company initiatives, or the existence of cooperation within and between departments.

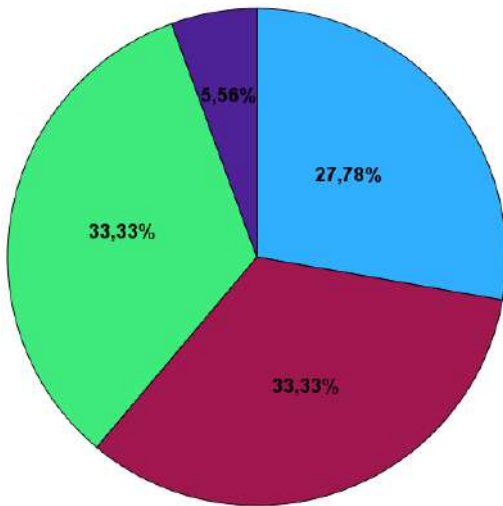


Figure 7a- Relationship with colleagues

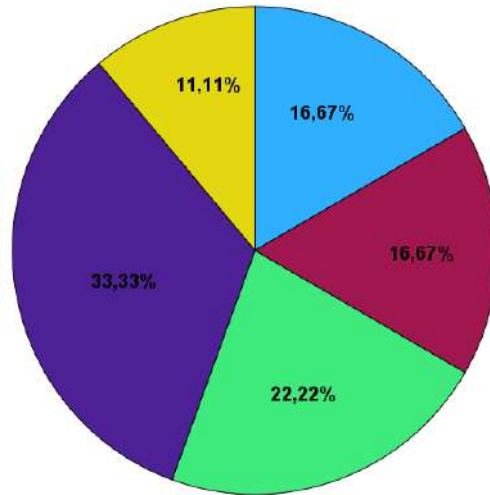


Figure 7b- Relationships outside work

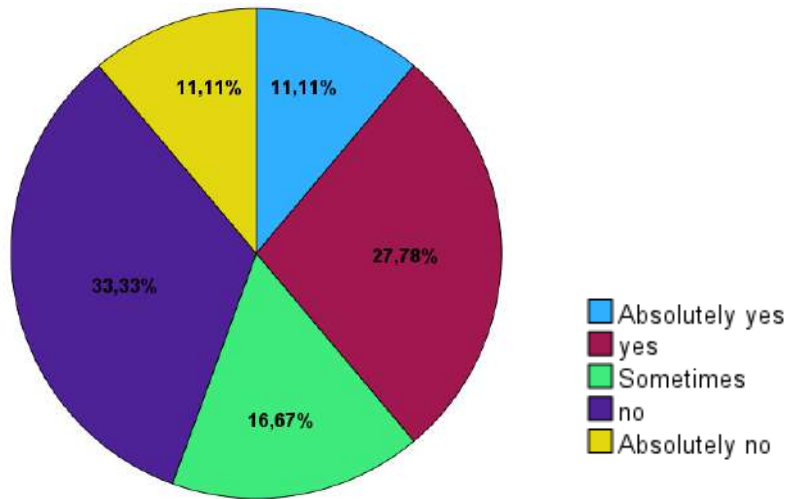


Figure 7c- Healthy and balanced lifestyle

The situation is different, however, when it comes to relationships or activities outside work: the majority of the respondents, 33.3%, state that their working hours do not allow them to carry on interpersonal relationships with friends and family outside work, and again 33.3% state that they are unable to have a healthy and balanced lifestyle for the same reasons, the highest percentages for both questions. Although only 11.1% report that they absolutely do not manage to have a healthy and balanced lifestyle, as in figure 7c, and to keep strong relationships in their private life, figure 7b, the same low percentage is related to the absolutely positive answer (16.7% for extra-work relationships). From these three answers, therefore, it appears that employees have more difficulty in finding time

to devote to activities and relationships outside the company context, spending a large part of the day on work activities. This confirms the data we saw in chapter two concerning the difficulty Chinese employees find in having a lifestyle that balances with their work, a factor that very often leads to great psychological stress.

As can be imagined, it is the employees who work more than 40 hours per week who report the most negative responses. As illustrated in figure 8a, 66.7% of these say they do not have time to cultivate relations outside of work, 11.1% say they do not manage to do so at all, while only 22.2% say they manage to do so, very different figures from those of employees working 40 hours a week or less. Still different, and more drastic, are the answers concerning the possibility of having a healthy and balanced lifestyle for those who work more than 40 hours per week (Figure 8b): 44.4% state that they do not have the possibility, and 22.2% state that they absolutely do not have the possibility, again very different for employees working less hours. As we have seen, the reason that prevents people from carrying on relationships and activities outside work is not always just the long working hours, but we can certainly say that it is one of the most influential aspects in this respect. In fact, it is precisely this reason that has prompted many Chinese, and especially young people, to take part in the Tang Ping movement in recent years: a rebellion against a working life that prevents people from developing a balanced private life that should not be based only on work.

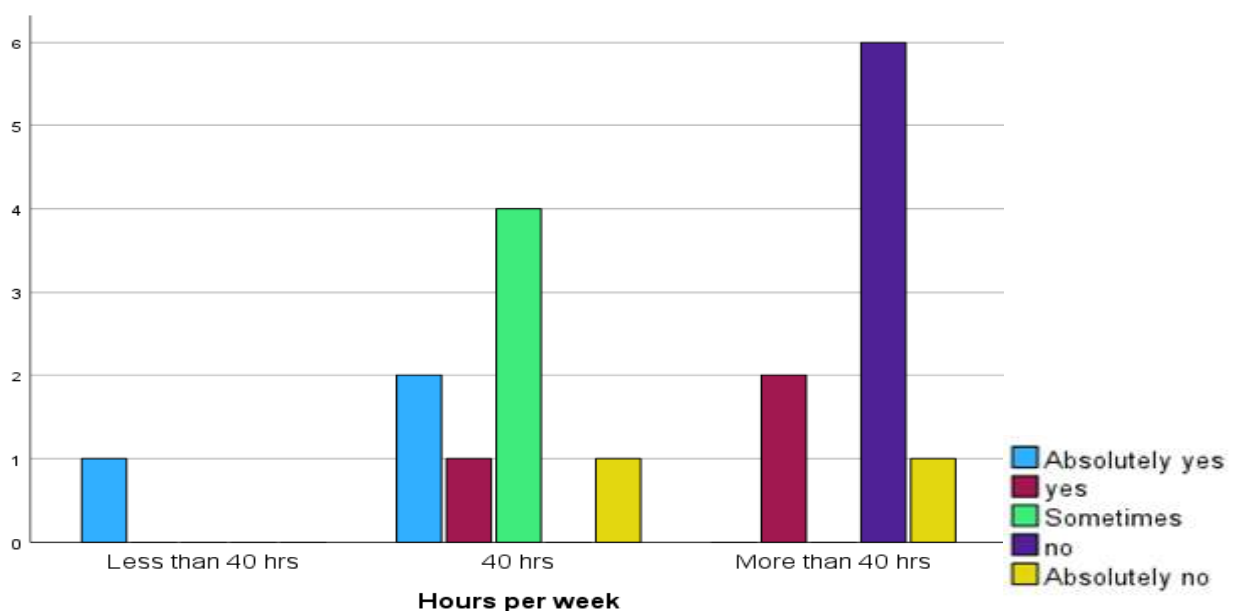


Figure 8a- Cultivate personal relationships

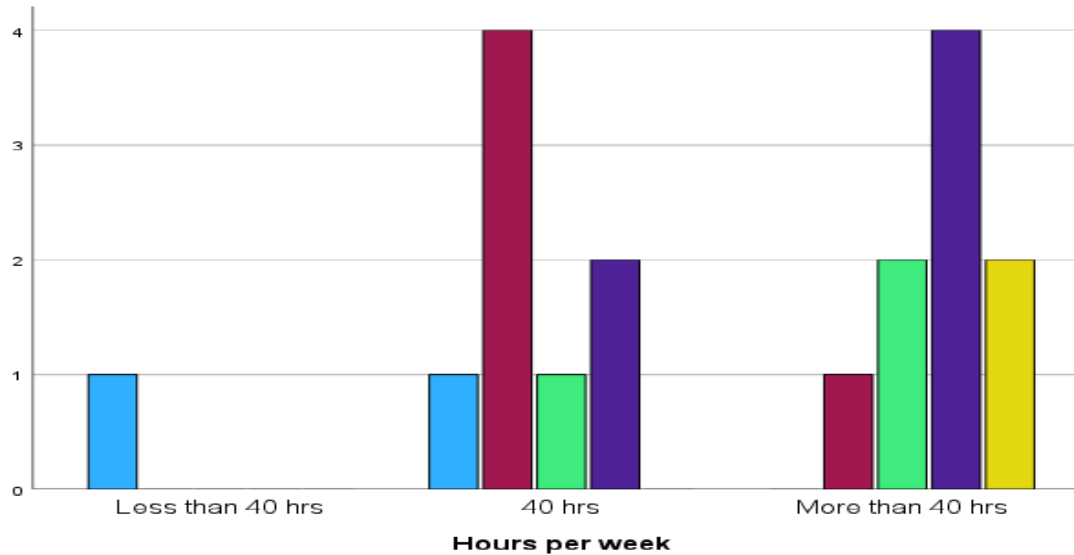


Figure 8b- Healthy and balanced lifestyle

- As for work intensity, the majority of respondents (44.4%) say they work at high intensity most of the time, while 22.2% say they do it all the time. Although the highest percentage works at high intensity only at certain times of the day, or only in the morning or afternoon, however, a high percentage (27.8%) stated that they work this way all day long. None of the respondents never work at high intensity, and all the others do so sporadically. However, it is interesting to note that it is precisely those employees who work more than 40 hours per week who most often work at a high intensity, with 66.7%, and among them almost half (44.4%) do so throughout the whole day, as illustrated in figure 9. It can therefore be stated that the workload for this group of people is on average much higher than that of other groups, having to multiply the work intensity of an entire day by the hours of overworking. According to the research reported in chapter one, these people are indeed very exposed to the phenomenon of burnout, which can make them unmotivated and unproductive. Almost half of the respondents also say that they work with the same intensity as their colleagues, few among them say they work with more or less intensity, and the same percentage is found among those who have a long working week.

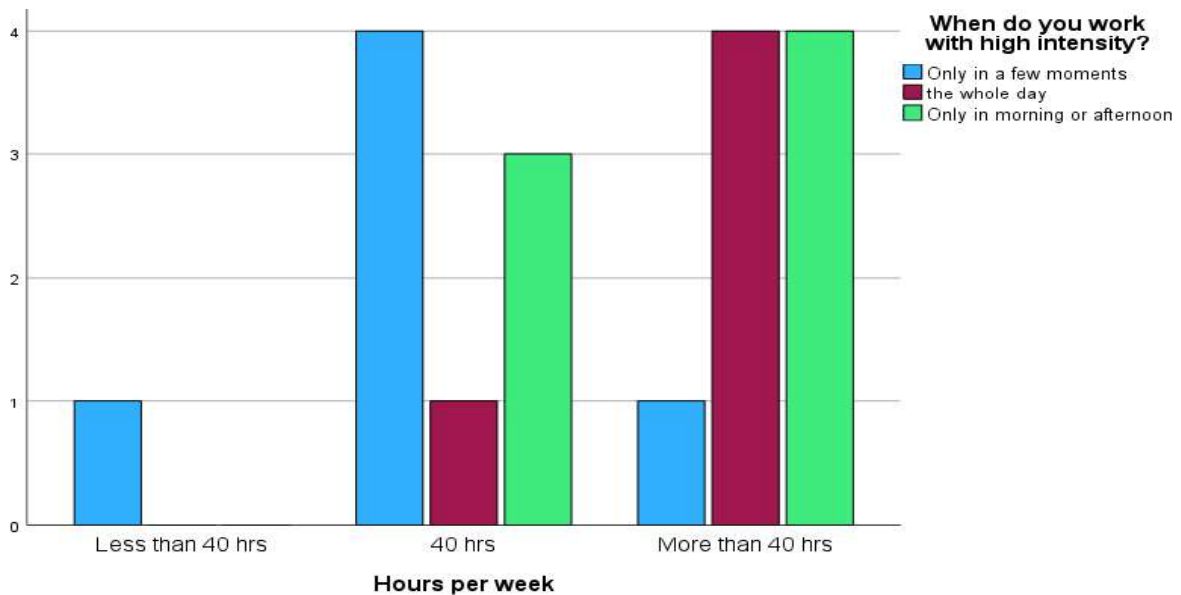


Figure 9- When employees work with high intensity

- Confirming the data in the previous chapters, the highest percentage of the respondents (33.3%) states that their working hours often make them physically and mentally tired, and 27.8% state that this happens often. This trend is unfortunately very widespread in China, and gives us an insight on what could be the influence of this data on the efficiency of the entire corporate organisation: the physical and mental tiredness of a large proportion of employees, who are unmotivated and stressed, affects the total productivity of the latter to a large extent. It is easy to see that overworking employees suffer much more from this aspect: 55.6 % state that they are physically and mentally tired most of the time, and 22.2 % that they are often so, as illustrated in figure 10a. However, this figure may also relate to a very high work intensity, and thus to the way in which the working day is dealt with regardless of the hours: 75% of the employees who work very often at a high intensity also state that they are very often mentally and physically tired, while 25% state that they are often tired (Figure 10b). It would therefore seem that it is more work intensity that influences this aspect, but remember that the survey shows that it is those who have long working weeks who have a high work intensity most of the time. It appears, therefore, that these two aspects go hand in hand.

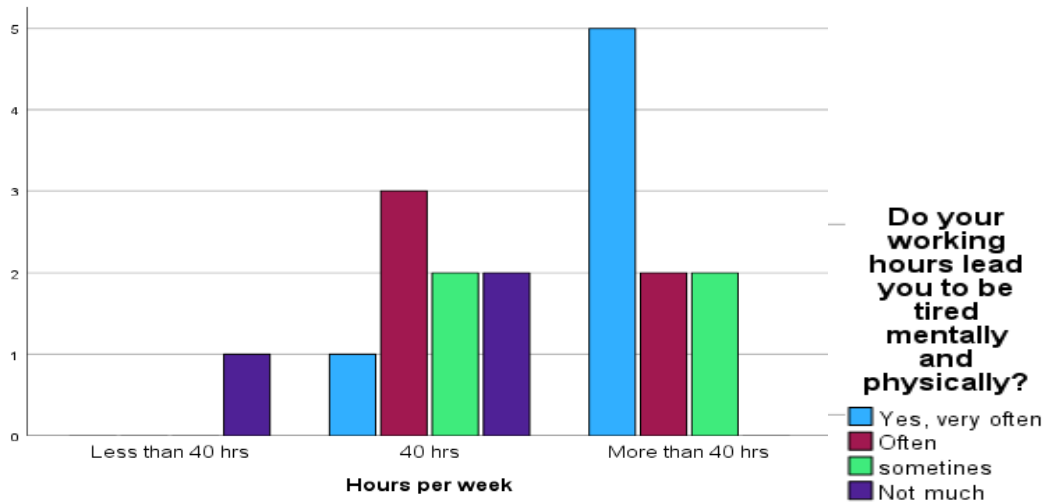


Figure 10a- Tiredness due to working hours

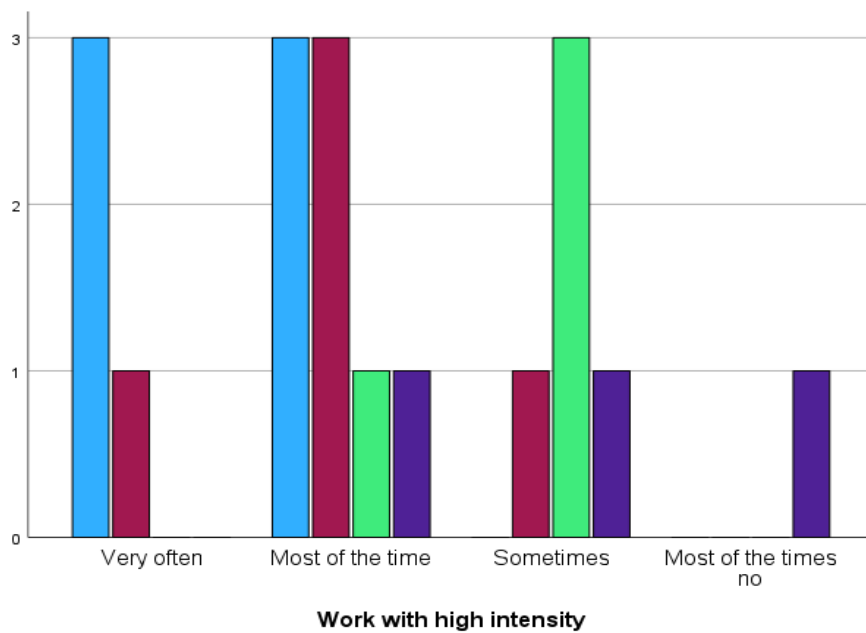


Figure 10b- Tiredness due to high intensity

By asking, instead, the interviewed employees how certain aspects of the corporate culture negatively influence their work efficiency, we can see that the most influential factor is having a little free time, followed by high work intensity and long working hours. The least influential factor among these turns out to be the working environment. There is, however, no particularly clear-cut tendency to identify one rather than the other aspect, and we can therefore deduce that it is probably more the combination of several factors that has a marked influence on people's work efficiency. For employees working more than 40 hours per week, working time and little free time have equal weight in the influence on work efficiency. Even for those who work very often with high intensity, the clearly most influential factor, with 50%, is having little free time. Although the substantial difference

between these two types of data may seem minimal, in reality it gives different weight to two different sides of the same issue: for some, the work itself, and thus specifically the performance of tasks and so on, may weigh heavily on a long working day, while for others the little free time that comes with it may weigh heavily, even though they may not find working long hours burdensome.

When respondents were asked more specifically how working hours influence the way they and their colleagues work, almost half of the respondents (44.4%) report that they enable them to work efficiently, and equally, 44.4% say that they sometimes make them unproductive. Here again, we do not find a clear trend towards one side or the other, and only a small proportion of respondents say that working hours ultimately make them tired and unproductive. On the other hand, among the workers considered to be overworking, it is 55.6% who state that their working hours often make them unproductive, and there are also employees who report that they are affected much more drastically, as we can see in figure 11a. We can therefore confirm here the words, quoted in chapter two, of experts such as Michael Leiter and Jennifer Moss, who state, referring to the 996 phenomenon, that after a certain number of hours of work per week there is not only a great risk of high stress, but work efficiency and productivity decreases considerably, to the point where it no longer even makes sense to continue working. We should also remember, as stated in the first chapter, that even according to the Stanford economist, John Pencavel, after about 48 hours a week a worker's productivity drops significantly. And when people work more than 55 hours a week the performance drops so much that putting in any more hours would be pointless. It is also interesting that, for those who work very often at a high intensity, 75% say that the hours often make them unproductive, while 25% say that they make them tired and unproductive (figure 11b).

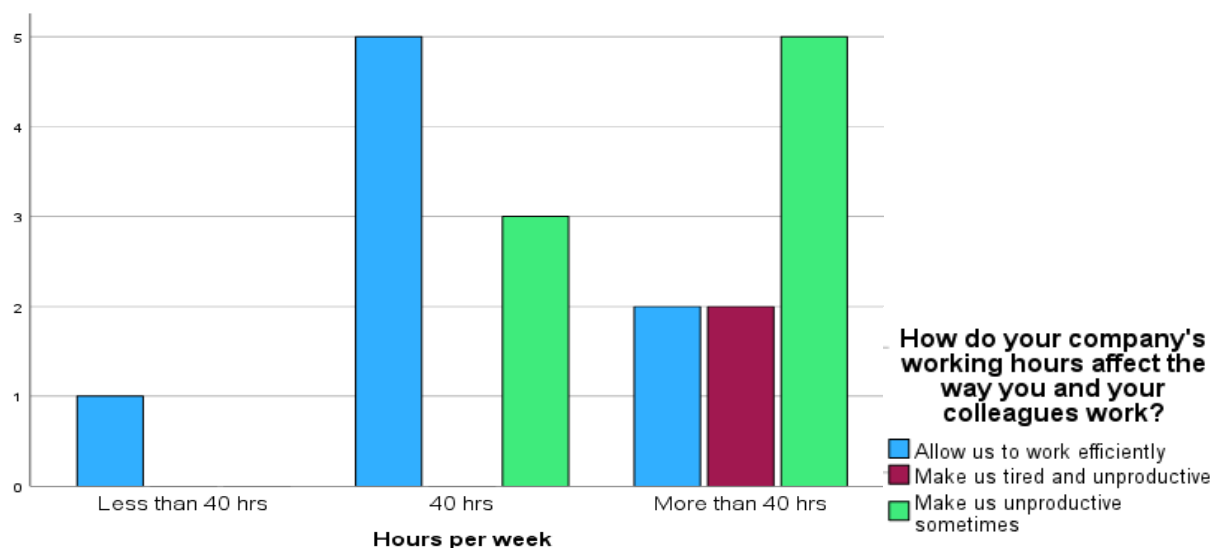


Figure 11a- Influence given by working hours

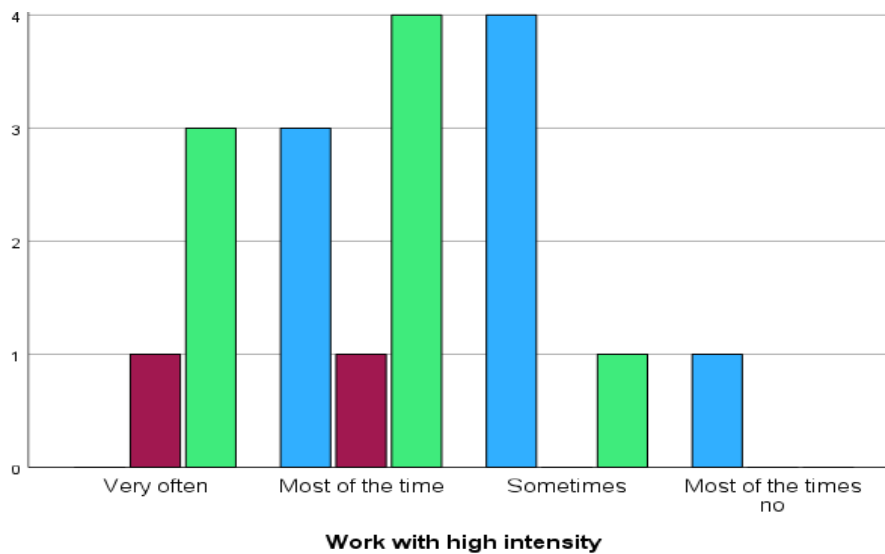


Figure 11b- Influence given by high intensity

Asking employees explicitly how much they could improve their productivity and efficiency by changing certain aspects of the company culture, it turns out that decreasing weekly working hours could greatly improve it for 33.3% of people, and it is almost obvious that it would be the same for 66.7% of employees working more than 40 hours per week. This is followed in order by a decrease in daily working hours, taking more breaks during the day, better re-division of the tasks and the improvement of cooperation and communication within the company. The answers are much more significant when the population surveyed is precisely that of overworking employees. The latter, in fact, believe that all these aspects could have an exponential influence on the improvement of their work performance. This data helps us to ultimately deduce that this segment of workers is most affected not only by long working hours, but also by many other aspects of the working environment. When spending most of one's time in a company, in fact, one emphasises the negative sides, which has a greater impact on the employee's life, while for others it may remain completely or almost unnoticed. These answers also help us, as I hoped, to better understand the data that emerged from question number 15, whose answers did not reflect a particular trend.

- Ultimately, the majority of respondents (38.9%) believe they are more or less satisfied with their working hours in relation to their personal life, work intensity and their own efficiency inside the company, 22.2% say they are very satisfied and only 11.1% say they are not satisfied at all. But even here the situation varies greatly if we take into account the part of employees in overworking: 44.4% state that they are not fully satisfied, 22.2% state that they are not at all satisfied, and 11.1% state that they are not at all satisfied. The gap by working hours can be seen in figure 12. It also turns out that production roles are the least satisfied in this respect, and the most satisfied are executives, although none of the managers claim to be totally dissatisfied.

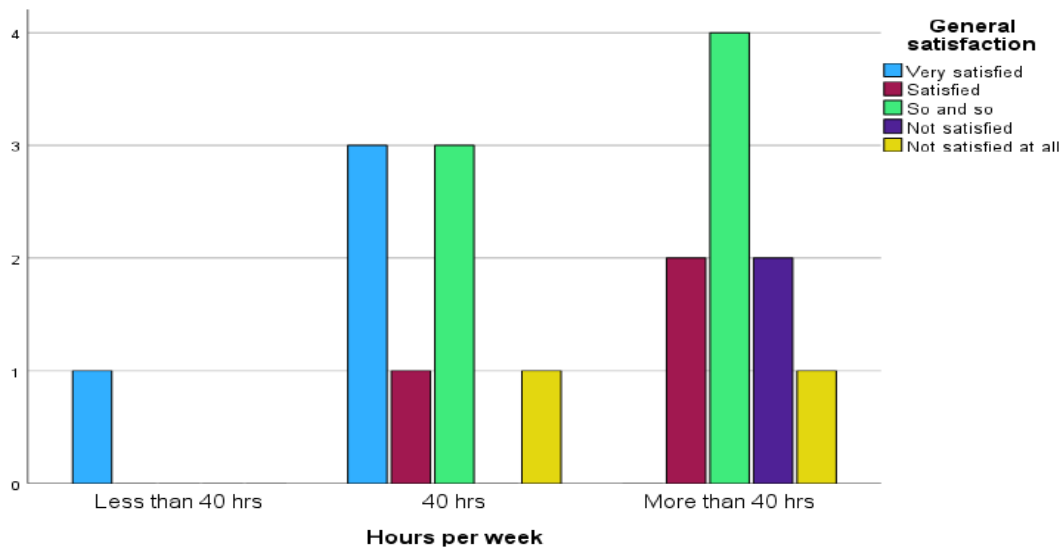


Figure 12- Satisfaction toward work

The answers from the survey confirm the data reported in the previous chapters on China and the dynamics within companies. Indeed, we can say that still a high percentage of employees are subject to very long working hours, and a large proportion of these are subject to the so-called long working week, i.e. 48 or more hours per week. While the curiosity of this research stemmed from the 996 phenomenon within Chinese companies, we have seen that the consequences of work stress and burnout occur even after only 48-50 working hours per month, so even though we have no concrete evidence of employees working around 70 hours per week, we can say that a large proportion of those surveyed fall into this range, which is very significant.

We also see that long working hours often go hand in hand with high work intensity, which is another factor that has the greatest influence on the lives of employees and their productivity. From our data, it is therefore very clear that employees in these two groups identify many more negative factors within the company organisation, and that they are more affected from these: they are more physically and mentally tired, they are often not very productive and motivated, not highly satisfied with their work in relation to all these factors, and therefore feel that there are many more aspects to be changed in order to be more work-efficient. All these aspects obviously have a great impact on the employee's life, and consequently on the way they work and perceive their job. This reflects to a large extent on the entire company: quite simply, as we have anticipated in the previous chapters, a large number of unproductive, tired, stressed and unmotivated employees slows down the company's pace and worsens its results. We can, in conclusion, state by logic and association that long working hours, as well as extremely high work intensity, can have a strong negative impact on the entire company organisation.

4.4 Data comparison: China, USA and EU

In this section, on the other hand, we will examine the comparison of data relating to the three countries taken into consideration, in order to see what the major differences are and to understand whether or not certain trends are widespread outside China and how in Europe and the United States working hours affect company organisation. Here again, it should be noted that we will examine data relating to employees taking into account a small sample population, with the aim of identifying data that can be interpreted as general trends.

- First of all, also great part of the respondents from EU and USA belong to the tech industry, even if the percentage is not as high as from China, respectively 27,8% and 23,1%, followed by service, fashion and food industry.
- Taking into account the working hours, in Europe half of the employees interviewed usually works for 8 hours per day, 33,3% for more than 8 hours and 16,7% for less, while data from USA reveal that almost half of the respondents (44,4%) work for more than 8 hours, 38,9% for 8 hours and 16,7% for less. When taking into account the hours worked per week, the data change a little for both countries. 44,4% of EU workers work for 40 hours, 33,3% for more ad 22,2% for less, while in USA the 38,9% work for 40 hours, 38,9% for more and 22,2% for less. So, as we can notice, the percentage goes down when talking about long weekly working hours, and is quite small compared to the one of China, where 50% of respondents reports working for more than 40 hours. Again, by looking at the hours worked on average per day, we can state that people in this range work for at least 48 hours a week. The comparison between weekly working hours from the three countries is shown in figure 13.

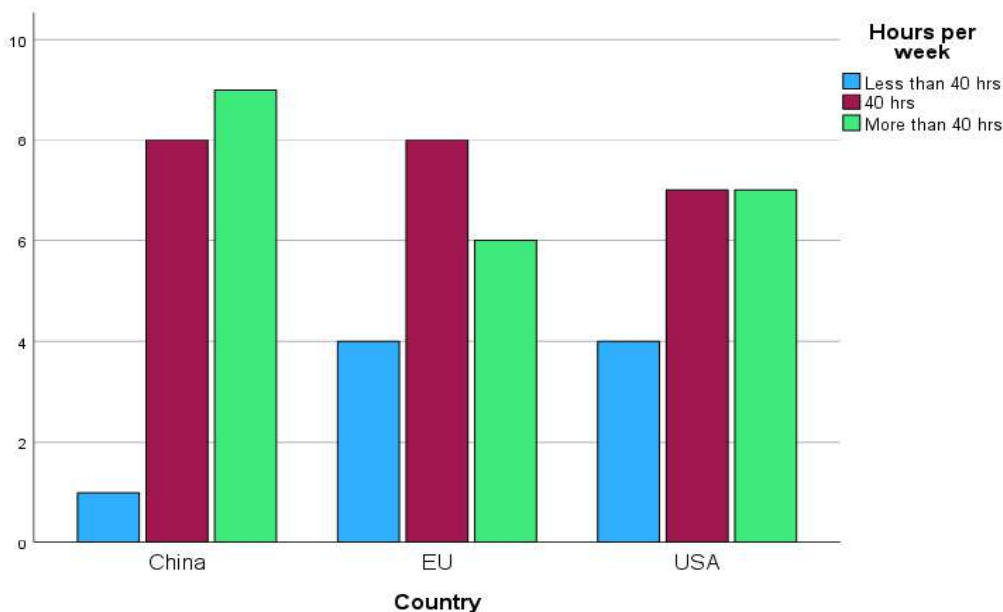


Figure 13- Worked hours per week divided by countries

These data confirm what was stated in the previous chapter: long working weeks are more widespread in Chinese firms, less widespread in US firms, although still very common, and much less widespread in European firms. This information is motivated, to recall what mentioned in the second chapter, by the exponential growth in recent years of the Chinese economic system, where firms are becoming its workhorse and are increasingly gaining importance. The great changes occurred in the Chinese economic system in the past two years and its stagnation and uncertainty deriving from the pandemic period is another focal topic, as many companies are suffering in terms of turnover and workforce, burdening the still existing workforce, which has to make up for the lack of a necessary number of workers and for the economic downturn by aiming for a quick recovery, while keeping up with the great demand coming from the rest of the world. The consequences are increased work intensity and longer working hours.

Moreover, as seen in the previous chapter, in recent years the ILO reported that there are still too many people working excessively long hours around the world, even though average working hours in many developed countries have been trending downward, particularly in countries with advanced economies and especially in Europe, but regular long hours of work remain a serious concern in most of the world today, especially in regions as Asia and the Pacific.

Regarding the flexibility in changing working hours, working days and shifts, as we have seen previously, 33.3% of Chinese employees have minimal flexibility, while for USA this same percentage is 38,9%, and 27,8% for EU (with 44,4% of people having flexibility). These answers confirm the data reported from the ILO regarding USA, and from Eurofound regarding EU about the flexibility, which we have seen in the previous chapter. On the other hand, taking into account employees working more than 40 hours per week, the percentage in this regard rises for China and falls for the US to the same level as Europe, as we can see in image 14.

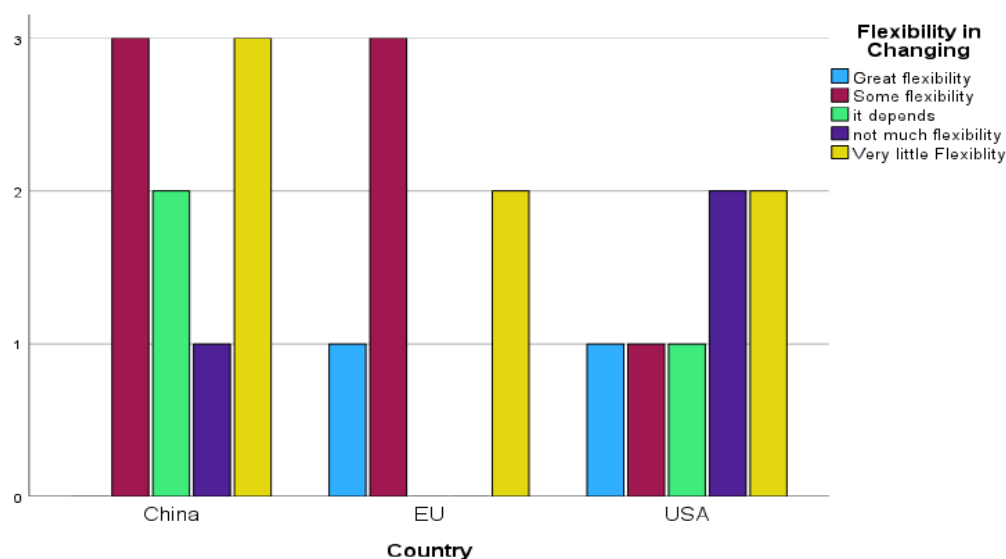


Figure 14- Flexibility in changing working hours, working days and shifts

- A further interesting comparison concerns the questions on the possibility of cultivating relationships and the work-life balance. With regard to the first question, for the respondents from both the US and the EU, the data are in line with those from China: most of them have the possibility of cultivating relationships with colleagues and employers in the workplace, thus also denoting here the possibility of being able to take breaks during working hours or to join company initiatives, or the existence of cooperation within and between departments. The data relating to the following questions, on the other hand, are slightly different: for the United States, 27.8% of the respondents state that they are not able, due to working hours, to maintain relationships in their private life, 22.2% state that they are absolutely able to do so and the majority of the answers fall in the middle, while for Europe the percentages are very balanced across all answers, but for both countries only 5.6% state that they are absolutely unable to do so. Comparing with the data from China, we can see that the answers are much more negative for the latter, and that in percentage terms far fewer employees manage, despite their working hours, to maintain personal relationships in their private lives, as illustrated in figure 15. Nonetheless, the percentage of employees falling into this range is also very high for the USA, which follows China, and for the EU.

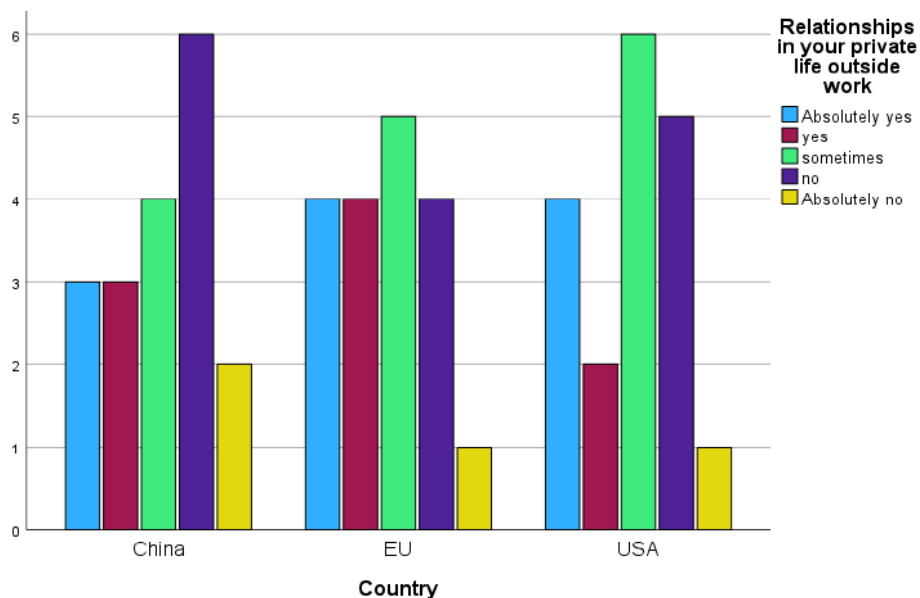


Figure 15- Relationship in private life

The balance of percentages is different when it comes to the possibility of pursuing a healthy and balanced lifestyle, work schedules allowing. Here, the most discouraging data comes from the United States, where 27.8% state that they cannot do it and 22.2% that they cannot do it at all, while for the EU, 38.9% state that they manage to do it, but none report that they can do it at all or that they cannot do it at all (Figure 16).

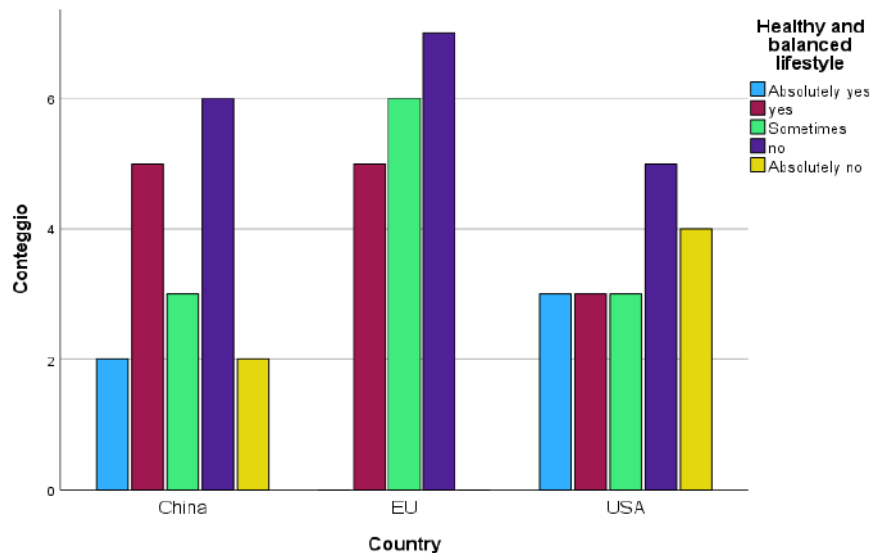


Figure 16- Healthy and balanced lifestyle

By looking at this data, we can state that the answers are not extremely positive in any of the three countries, despite the fact that we have seen that on average the highest number of overworking employees is to be found in China. We can deduce, seeing the negative data particularly from the USA, and in the EU mostly with regard to a healthy lifestyle, that the possibility of maintaining a work-life balance very often goes beyond one's own working hours, but also depends on other factors. We note, however, that the negative responses in this respect come largely from those who work more than 40 hours also in Europe and the USA.

Not having a work-life balance is something that unfortunately characterises many workers nowadays, but not having external stimuli or ways to be distracted makes employees stressed and unmotivated at work. In fact, as we saw in chapter three, the phenomenon of 'Great resignations' has been growing in recent years, especially in the USA, and the cause is to be found in the psycho-physical exhaustion of workers, which leads them to burnout. This movement and the Tang Ping movement are related, they develop for the same reason and have the same consequences, and this shows us how the phenomenon is actually widespread throughout the world now, or at least in the more economically advanced countries where work is taking over.

- As we have assessed in the previous paragraph, work intensity is one of the elements that most influences an employee's working life and the perception he or she has of his or her work, as well as having a huge influence on the entire company organisation. Here again, the data is unfavourable to the USA, where the majority of employees, 38.9%, state that they always work at a high intensity, and 27.8% state that they have these rhythms throughout the whole day, while the majority, 55.6%, state that they have them only in the morning or only in the afternoon. On the other hand, 33.3% of EU employees work at a high intensity all the time, and among these, 44.4% say they do it all day

long, while 27.8% say they do it quite often. Compared to the data of Chinese employees, where 44.4% say they work at high intensity most of the time and 22.2% say they do it all the time, we can see that the incidence is quite higher for the USA and the EU, where the USA again has the most negative value, as shown in figure 17. Most likely, therefore, the work-life imbalance that we find in the US and EU is due precisely to the high work intensity to which employees are subjected, rather than to long working hours, as is more the case in China. In fact, as seen above, very intense work rhythms can lead to physical and mental fatigue to a large extent, as we will see below, which induces high stress: all factors that de-motivate people to engage in non-work activities.

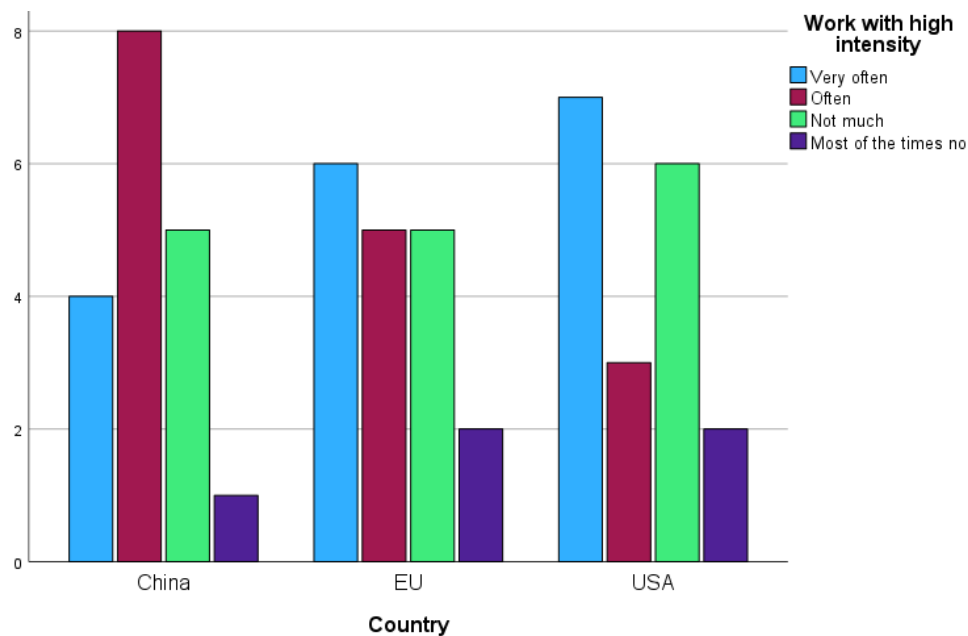


Figure 17- When employees work with high intensity

- With much more negative percentages than in China, indeed, in EU 55.6% of employees state that work often makes them physically and mentally tired, while in the USA 44.4% state that this happens very often (figure 18). Given the analysis of the previous question, it is very likely that this data is greatly influenced by the high intensity of work during the day, which we have seen to be more prevalent in these countries than, for example, long working hours, which have a great impact here in any case. We can therefore see that this trend is unfortunately widespread not only in China, but in many other economically developed countries, and that it is a consequence of a mix of factors, with different prevalence of each depending on the corporate culture.

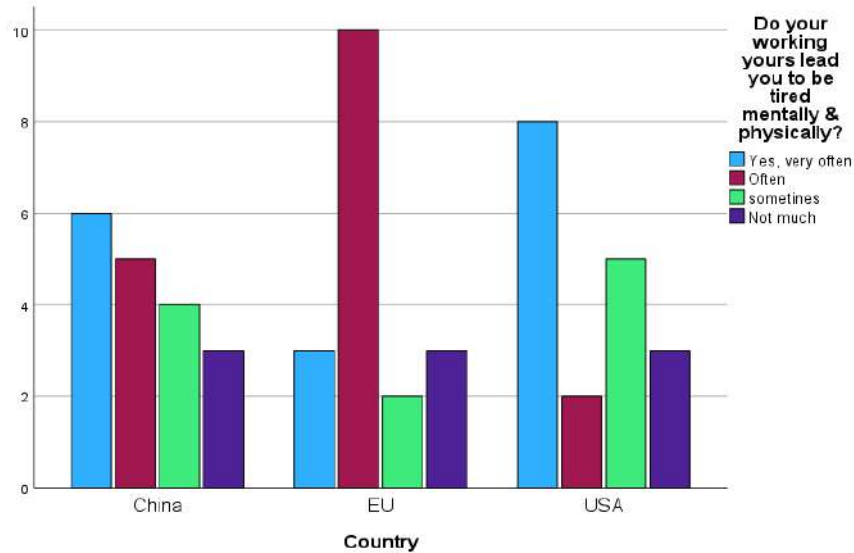


Figure 18- Tiredness divided by countries

Compared to the responses from China, the US and EU present more specific trends when are asked how certain aspects of the corporate culture negatively influence their work efficiency, slightly different from those from China. For both Europe (38.9 %) and the US (55.6 %), the most influential factor is a negative working environment, but all others are very influential: little free time, high work intensity and long working hours. The negative working environment is the least influential aspect for Chinese employees, for whom instead it is having little free time. High working intensity is also more negatively impacting for Europe and the USA than for China, as illustrated in Figure 19, and probably confirming what was stated earlier.

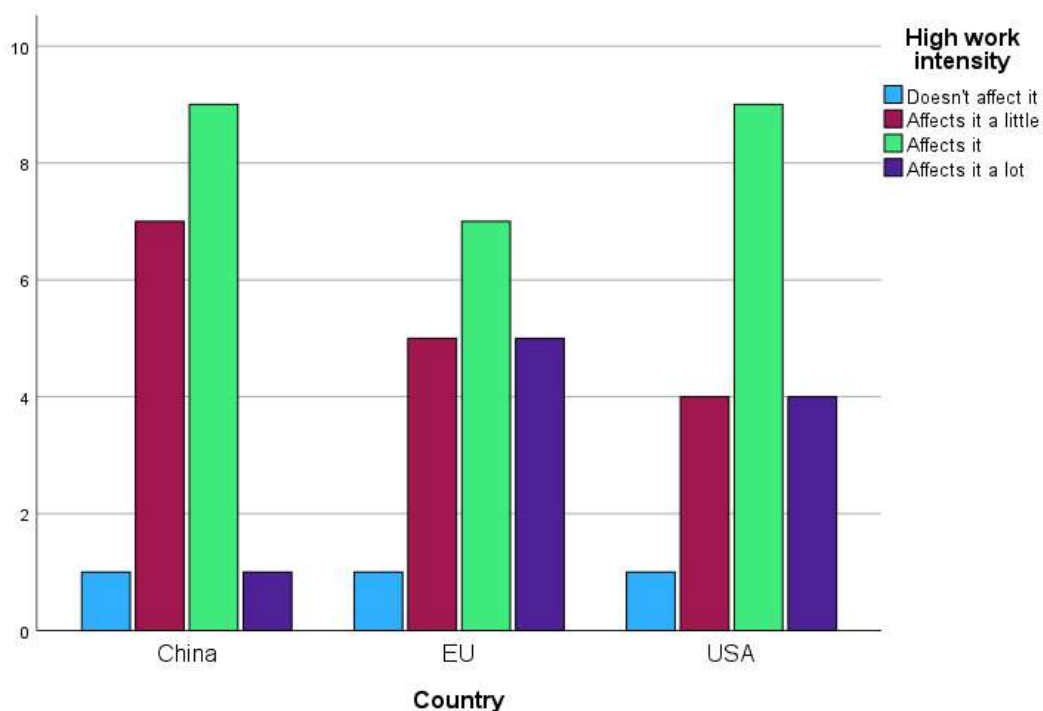


Figure 19- How much high work intensity affect work efficiency

The results are again more negative for the EU and the USA when respondents were asked more specifically how working hours influence the way they and their colleagues work, where for both countries 50% of employees report that these often make them unproductive. Furthermore, 27.8% of European employees report that the working day makes them completely tired and unproductive, while for the USA only 16.7% give this answer, as illustrated in figure 20. The data might seem confusing at first sight, since it is in China that we have the highest percentage of employees working more than 40 hours per week, but as we have seen, the values may depend on several factors. Certainly, however, the increasing trend seen in chapter three is confirmed: more and more employees are experiencing fatigue, low productivity and low motivation due to work, and this especially since the beginning of the pandemic. The year 2020 has in fact unaccustomed many people to high-intensity work and long hours, and, returning to the workplace, they have suffered even more from these aspects.

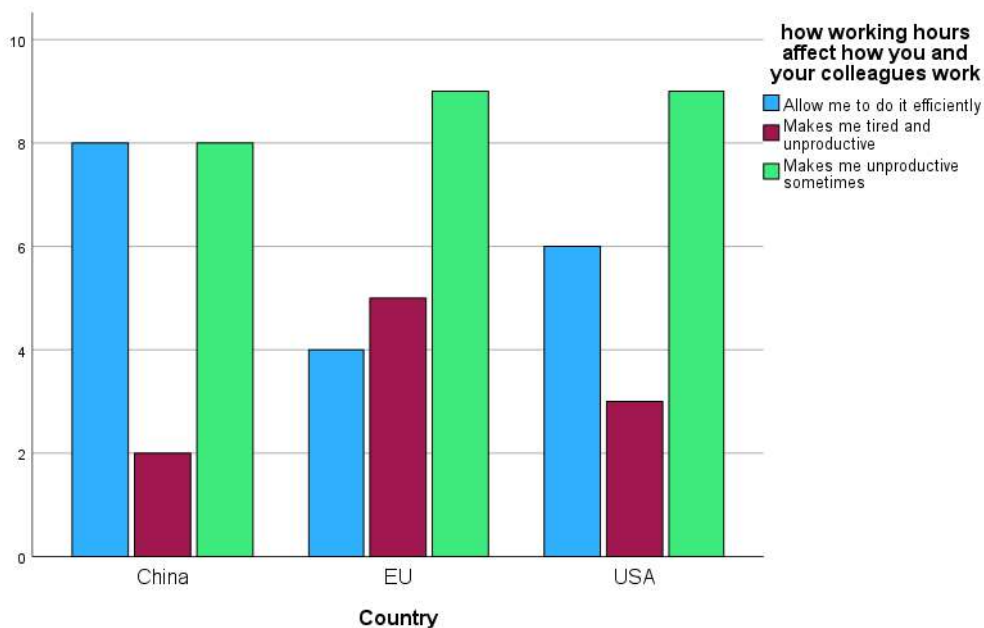


Figure 20- Influence given by working hours

Another interesting data is that, while by asking employees how much they could improve their productivity and efficiency by changing certain aspects of the company culture the 33,3% of Chinese employees says that decreasing weekly working hours would be the aspect that could improve it more, for EU and USA the majority of employees say it would be improving communication and cooperation inside the company. It is followed by better re-division of the tasks for both the countries. These data help us understanding the different importance given to certain issues inside companies in China, USA and EU: it might be, indeed, that for Chinese employees the company's organization works better than for others, and so employees are quite satisfied with the division of the tasks and

the cooperation compared to employees from USA and EU, for who the weekly hours seems to be a smaller problem. Nevertheless, the issue of division of the tasks can be related to the high work intensity problem that these people are living: a better re-division of tasks would give more flexibility to employees by letting them working less intensely, at least in some moments of the day.

- Lastly, while on the one hand the majority of Chinese employees (38.9%) believe they are more or less satisfied with their working hours in relation to their personal life, work intensity and their own efficiency inside the company, and the greater percentage for EU gave the same answer, on the other hand the 38,9% of USA employees are not satisfied. However, the 22.2% for EU declared to be not satisfied at all, while the 27,8% for USA is satisfied, as shown in figure 21.

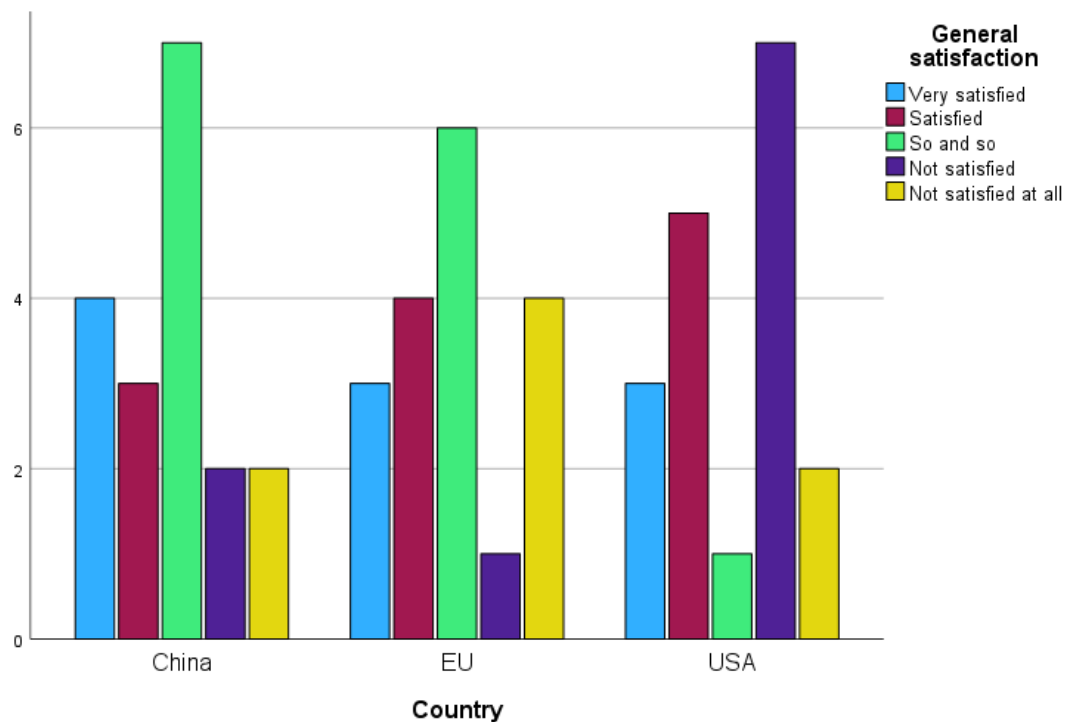


Figure 21- Satisfaction toward work

From the comparison of the data on China, the US and the EU just analysed, we can, broadly speaking, state that most of the trends we find within Chinese companies are in reality also widespread elsewhere. Although these three countries have substantial social and cultural differences, especially with regard to China, they share many common features within the labour sphere, and this is certainly to be found in the globalisation and economic interdependence they have developed.

Much of the data reported in the previous chapter on the working quality of these countries is also confirmed, which gives the survey even more credibility.

As stated, long working weeks, 48 hours or more, are most prevalent in China, followed by the US and then the EU. Although the 996 phenomenon is mainly related to Chinese companies, the data show us that the trend of long working hours is not only peculiar to them. We note, however, that

Europe and the USA are characterised more by the high work intensity, to which most employees are subjected, than China, and from the survey responses it can be deduced that it is this aspect that influences people more, and consequently the company organisation itself. We have also seen that rebellion movements of employees against an extremely oppressive corporate culture have been developing in recent years in these countries, confirming a very negative common trend. In either the US, China or the EU, the majority of employees are tired and unproductive from their work, fail to have a good work-life balance and believe there are many aspects to improve in order to increase their motivation, all aspects that very often lead to burnout. If therefore, according to the survey, it is the long working hours that have the most negative influence on Chinese employees and companies, it is the high work intensity that has the most negative influence on European and US employees and companies.

There is, however, one further observation to be made: as we mentioned earlier, these three countries have very different cultural and social backgrounds, which leads employees today having different work habits and perceptions, which can greatly influence the comparison of the answers given in the survey. For example, the culture of extreme devotion to work derived firstly from Confucian values and then from the Reform Era greatly influences the view of work that Chinese employees have, as well as the Chinese high "Power Distance" identified by Hofstede, whereby the less powerful members of institutions, organisations and society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. Chinese employees may therefore have very different perceptions of their work status and work habits from those of US and European employees and vice versa, whereby certain issues may be perceived more or less negatively.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to understand what influence working hours have on Chinese business organisation through a detailed analysis of Chinese HRM. To achieve this goal, it was useful to first analyse the importance of HRM within companies and to understand the great influence that the working environment can have on people, both positively and negatively. Next, we analysed HRM in China specifically and the widespread corporate culture, getting to the heart of the 996 phenomenon, which characterises the modern debate on working conditions in China and gives us a great overview of the work situation there. It was then necessary to report data from secondary researches that provided us with a reference for the primary one, analysing in particular the working quality and trends in China, Europe and the United States, thus engaging in a comparative analysis to better understand China's position within the sphere of the great economic powers. Finally, the survey analysed in the last chapter, which is the heart of the research, gives us useful data to answer the main question of the thesis by making an *excursus* of all the themes analysed previously, giving a final picture of the entire discourse.

As we have said, people are the most important resource for companies, and they influence to a large extent their success or failure, but once the best employees have been recruited, it is important that they feel comfortable within the working environment. HRM has to take care of this as well: it is important to set firm work objectives and to allocate tasks in order to achieve them, but it is equally important to take care of people and to implement an internal organisation that gives them the opportunity to give one hundred per cent in their work. Indeed, we have seen that the working environment and corporate culture have a very strong impact on the employee's life and perception towards their job, and we have observed from the survey that this has a strong influence on the company itself, positively or negatively according to the case.

The work related factors of the corporate culture that have an impact on employees are manifold, and obviously depend on a subjective matter: everyone is in fact more easily influenced by what touches them personally, depending on their own life experiences, values, sensitivities and priorities. The survey showed, however, that among these factors, the most influential for Chinese employees is working hours: in fact, working hours in China are longer than in other economically developed countries, and this is why China is under the world spotlight when it comes to human rights within the workplace. It is here in indeed that we are facing the phenomenon of 996, widely described above, which, although deemed illegal by the law, is still driving a huge number of employees to burnout, very often resulting in deaths and suicides, and it is from this phenomenon that the curiosity to undertake this research was sparked.

From the studies reported here, it was possible to realise that the burnout crisis, demotivation, unproductivity and fatigue, are easily reached from the 48-50 working hours per week, considered to be long working weeks, in which most Chinese employees are involved. It turned out that overworking employees were much more prone to suffer from various work issues, were often tired, unproductive and unmotivated, had little satisfaction with their working life and did not have a good work-life balance. All of this obviously has a negative impact on the company's objectives, as well as having associated costs, since simply unproductive and tired people slow down the general pace, and stressed and unmotivated people are more distracted and do their job worse. Despite the above, however, overworking is not the only factor that causes this: the survey data reveal that for the US and EU the most impactful factor in this respect is high work intensity, regardless of working hours. All these negative features were in fact highlighted by employees of these two countries who are found to work at a very high intensity during their working days. We therefore deduce that long working weeks have a stronger influence in Chinese companies.

Demotivation, unproductivity and stress also arose from much more subjective and personal reasons, such as the degree of satisfaction with one's work, i.e. with the tasks performed, the objectives achieved, internal cooperation and available resources: in this regard, many employees in the three countries were dissatisfied with their job, and in particular the lack of cooperation and collaboration was identified by EU and US respondents as one of the aspects that should be implemented, together with a reallocation of tasks.

HR can probably help employees with these matters by questioning them more often and giving them more power to manage themselves, within certain limits of course. As we saw in chapter one, there are in fact human resource management techniques, such as empowerment, that allow the power to be decentralised, making people more independent, while allowing greater expression within the company and helping employees, even those not on the front lines, to make decisions regarding their own tasks.

It must also be noted that high degrees of stress are often self-induced by the employees themselves, independently from the corporate culture or employers, and the causes may be manifold. Achieving certain work objectives, finishing tasks in the shortest possible time, striving for a particular salary, personal satisfaction, venting personal problems at work are just some of the reasons why employees may be the first to cause themselves stress.

In any case, the questionnaire, confirming the data collected above, shows us that many of the trends identified in the Chinese working and corporate culture are actually widespread elsewhere as well, and that employees' perceptions of their own work are not entirely florid in other realities either. The reason why there are so many employees in China, Europe and the United States with high work

rhythms, long working hours, who are tired, stressed and unable to have a good work-life balance is to be found in the economic power in which they operate. This is in fact what the three countries have in common, whose companies are increasingly finding themselves having to keep up with a high pace as competition grows day by day and targets become higher and higher. Work can now, in a society based almost entirely on economics, be defined as the regulator of people's lives, where time is marked by working hours and people's lives are reorganised according to work commitments, which are very often put before private ones and personal goals.

COVID-19 has certainly intensified and increased the world's economic challenges, which is precisely why the tendency of workers to burnout has increased exponentially over the past three years, despite the fact that initially the pace of work had calmed down and despite the fact that it is now possible to enjoy alternative methods of working, such as smart working, which we have seen, however, is not a mode appreciated by all. The return to the workplace has caused fatigue and demotivation for many people, who are no longer used to the chaotic nature of work, often finding themselves having to do post-pandemic business readjustment, all this with a reduced workforce. So if initially the working conditions following the pandemic gave a glimmer of hope to workers in terms of work rhythms, what is now emerging is indeed a return to “normality”, but even more frenetic.

What differentiates China from these other major world economic powers, however, is that employees often find it difficult to rely on protection from the state and the laws, and censorship frequently does not allow them to come forward and denounce certain conditions. It should also be specified that there is much more poverty in China, especially outside the big cities, so that employees are more willing to work under particular conditions in order to bring home a salary for themselves and their families. Moreover, as we have seen above, Chinese employees are more inclined by culture to accept the fact that decision-making power is not shared by all but belongs only to the top level, and therefore they are also more prone to respect the decisions of the latter, as well as having by culture a marked dedication to work given, as anticipated, by Confucian values and the consequences of the Reform. Given the exponential growth of the Chinese economy in recent years, many entrepreneurs, such as Jack Ma, are pursuing a corporate culture that goes totally against workers' rights, knowing that they will never be left unemployed for the reasons mentioned above.

Trying, therefore, to make a prediction about what the possible future developments in this respect might be for China, looking at the data analysed so far, two distinct trends could be identified.

On the one hand, China's economic growth, in spite of the period of uncertainty, is set to increase steadily given its importance, and thus it is possible that the pace and conditions of work will remain unchanged. Furthermore, taking into account the socio-cultural background of Chinese employees, entrepreneurs will continue to find employees willing to work under these conditions.

On the other hand, however, a more positive picture emerges for the future. As we have seen, many young people are resisting this oppressive work culture, rebelling for less stressful working conditions and a better balance with their private lives. This may probably stem from the increasing contacts that the new generations have with the West, including in terms of work, and with different cultures, which leads them to open their minds and see the existence of different habits, or simply stem from generational exhaustion. In addition, the issue of human rights is increasingly under the social spotlight, which could draw more attention to the issue to the point of partially resolving it.

At the moment we are still in a stalemate situation, where companies are reorganising and employees are experiencing the consequences of the pandemic, but if on the one hand the prospect is that of a return to an unflourishing work normality, on the other hand many positive paths could open up, where corporate goals can be safely achieved in parallel with the well-being of employees and full respect for their rights.

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