



The hidden cost of loving your job

RESEARCH BRIEF

If you love your job, your manager may pile more work on you. New research shows that managers consistently overload their most motivated employees. And in doing so, risk burning out the very people they rely on most.

Why it matters

While new tasks may be welcomed by some employees, over time, this creates an unequal distribution of labor, quietly eroding motivation, raising turnover risk, and reducing job satisfaction.

- ▶ In a study, managers allocated extra tasks to more motivated employees 74–81% of time.
- ▶ Across 6 days; managers chose more motivated employee on 69% of occasions.
- ▶ Employees assigned disproportionate additional tasks reported lower job satisfaction and higher turnover intentions.

How we know

Six pre-registered studies spanning field surveys, interactive lab experiments with real financial stakes, and a six-day longitudinal design was employed. Four supplemental studies and two theory-driven intervention tests were done. Hundreds of real managers across 27–37 industries participated.

In a key study, managers were paired with employees whose actual motivation and burnout data had already been collected, allowing a direct comparison between what managers predicted and what employees actually experienced.

What researchers found

- ▶ Managers prefer to assign additional tasks to employees perceived as more motivated—the authors call this *motive oversimplification*.
- ▶ Managers *assumed* that enjoying one's main work means an employee will also enjoy unrelated tasks and is less likely to burn out.
- ▶ Managers *overestimated* how much motivated employees would enjoy the extra work and underestimated burnout risk, while doing the reverse for less motivated colleagues.
- ▶ Disproportionate task allocation *eroded* job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

What this means

- ▶ **For managers:** Enthusiasm is not a buffer against burnout. The instinct to assign extra work is understandable but backfires and risks losing your most engaged employees.
- ▶ **For HR leaders:** Build workload equity checks into manager training. Disproportionate task allocation is a retention risk that accumulates quietly and is rarely flagged until it's too late.
- ▶ **For organizations:** Motivated employees are a competitive advantage but only if protected from bias. Structural safeguards matter as much as individual manager awareness.

Now what?

- ▶ **Bundle task allocation decisions:** When managers assign multiple tasks rather, unequal distribution patterns become visible and the bias significantly decreases.
- ▶ **Train managers on the burnout blind spot:** Informing managers that intrinsically motivated employees are more, not less, susceptible to burnout.
- ▶ **Track tasks distribution:** Watch for feedback from those who receive additional tasks over time and flag imbalances early in workload reviews.
- ▶ **Workload equity audits:** Take a holistic view of workloads among high performers.

LINK TO THE STUDY

