I feel the need – the need for speed!
Unreasonable tasks, work pace, psychological detachment and emotional exhaustion

Katarina Katja Mihelić, Nada Zupan and Ajda Merkuž
School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Abstract
Purpose – At the dawn of a new decade, as ever more corporations are pursuing sustainable working conditions and advocating employee well-being, employees are increasingly tending to feel fatigued and drained by their work, which compromises their performance. Drawing on the job demands–resources model and social acceleration debate, the authors test a moderated mediation model. Specifically, the authors hypothesise that unreasonable tasks raise perceptions of emotional exhaustion when the pace of work is increased and investigate the moderating role of psychological detachment.
Design/methodology/approach – This study used a sample of 245 employees from Europe, all knowledge workers, to test the hypotheses.
Findings – Apart from unreasonable tasks being directly related with emotional exhaustion, this relationship was mediated by the perceived work pace. In addition, the authors establish psychological detachment as a relevant moderator for the mediating effect.
Practical implications – Managers and HR practitioners are equipped with a better understanding of the effects of an increasing speed of work, the conditions leading to it and the individual and organizational resources that may help to create healthy and meaningful job positions, which facilitate employee efficiency.
Originality/value – Our study expands the literature on contemporary stressors and adds to what is known about the ‘dark side’ of job demands that affect the organizational bottom-line, as well as the resource-based mechanism that can buffer the negative effects.

Keywords Emotional exhaustion, Job demands, Unreasonable tasks, Work pace, Speed of work, Psychological detachment

Introduction
An increased workload (Pindek et al., 2019b; Van Veldhoven, 2014), heavy-work investment (Rabenu et al., 2021) and working long hours (Ten Brummelhuis et al., 2017) including the weekend have become the new norm in the corporate landscape. These job demands are triggering debates on the acceleration of the pace of work and family life (Eriksen, 2001), and today’s high-speed society in general (Rosa, 2010). Conceptually, job demands refer to “those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (i.e. cognitive or emotional) effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs” (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004, p. 296). How an employee perceives them affects their work and family performance, job engagement, health and well-being.
Current research suggests job demands can have harmful short- and long-term consequences such as fatigue, lower ability to concentrate, exhaustion, injuries, decreased satisfaction and performance, work–family conflicts and, ultimately, burnout (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Boekhorst et al., 2017; Karanika-Murray et al., 2017).

As work conditions can cause strain and distress (Schieman et al., 2006), it is important that managers and HR practitioners understand how and when particular job demands become harmful and compromise efficiency. One job demand worth exploring is unreasonable tasks, conceptualized as inappropriate task assignments that go beyond the scope of an employee’s role requirements (Sonnentag and Lischetzke, 2018; Semmer et al., 2010). These can occur on a daily basis (Ahmed et al., 2018) due to supervisor or organizational deficiencies (Fila and Eatough, 2020), and their effects are relatively unknown. Unreasonable tasks represent a “potential threat to the self” (Semmer et al., 2015, p. 33), are considered a work stressor (Kilponen et al., 2021) and decrease well-being (Thun et al., 2018).

In one study, more than 50% of employees reported 10% of their daily tasks as unreasonable, and 7% of the employees viewed at least 31% of their daily tasks as such (Thun et al., 2018). Because unreasonable tasks are added to the in-role tasks, they may drive the employee to work faster, having to perform more tasks within the same amount of time. In 2015, on average 23% of employees in European Union reported working at high speed all or most of the time, and an additional 37% from one to three quarters of the time (Eurofound). In the context of continuous performance pressure which increases the pace of work, unreasonable tasks become an even greater burden for employees.

Employee exposure to job demands related to workload and speed deserves further scientific attention because it may lead to adverse outcomes (Mauno et al., in press), including emotional exhaustion, a central component of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001), that refers to feelings of being exhausted by one’s work and emotionally overextended. In Europe alone, on average 10% of the workforce feels always exhausted at the end of the working day (Schaufeli, 2018) with people who are exhausted showing greater tendencies to leave their job post in the next 2 years (Eurofound, 2018).

Grounded in the job demands-resources model and the social acceleration debate, in this paper we test a moderated-mediation model. We propose that the relationship between unreasonable tasks and emotional exhaustion is mediated by work pace. We further test the moderating role of psychological detachment, which encapsulates temporary disengagement from work in off-job time (Sonnentag et al., 2010). Essentially, it refers to mentally switching off after the workday has come to an end, and means not working at home and not thinking about work-related matters.

The present study intends to make several contributions. First, we provide a more nuanced view of the detrimental effects of two understudied job demands (i.e. stressors) on individual emotional exhaustion, namely, unreasonable tasks and work pace, with the speed of work being a relevant societal issue (Van Veldhoven, 2014). More specifically, in our speed-up-society (Rosa, 2010), the expectations of working faster and faster can be increasingly found across occupations and hierarchical levels (Ulferts et al., 2013), making it timely and relevant to investigate the consequences of work pace. In this way we contribute to the ongoing debate on more general social acceleration (Rosa, 2010, 2013) and organization-based work intensification (Mauno et al., in press), which is triggering both scholarly and public interest because it has become an organizational reality for many people. The latter is evident in the common complaints of people about the lack of time and general accelerated pace of everyday life (Szollos, 2009). However, despite the obvious existence of a high-speed society, empirical evidence on this issue remains sparse (Ulferts et al., 2013). Second, we focus explicitly on unreasonable tasks, a form of illegitimate tasks, because it has been suggested they exert a more negative effect on the psyche, awaken more explosive negative emotions, decrease performance and are typically becoming more frequent in the workplace (Pindek et al., 2019a).
Unreasonable tasks, in particular, have only recently gained more scholarly attention (e.g. Fila and Eatough, 2020). Third, we establish work pace, a current detrimental work demand, as an explanatory mediator in the relationship between unreasonable tasks and emotional exhaustion. Finally, we extend knowledge on the role played by personal resources (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007), and more specifically resource-based mechanisms, to buffer the detrimental effects of job demands on workplace behaviour and performance. This is important, because to date little is known about the role that mechanisms such as recovery strategies may play in the relationship between unreasonable tasks and individual strain (Fila and Eatough, 2020). By introducing psychological detachment as a moderator in this regard, we demonstrate that employees who are unable to switch off from work and continue thinking about it at home become exhausted more quickly as the speed of their work increases.

**Theoretical background**

A contemporary theoretical model that attempts to explain the reasons for employee exhaustion is the job demands–resources model (JD-R) (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). At its core lies the notion that extreme job demands lead to constant overload, resulting in exhaustion, which in turn negatively impacts employee productivity. The present research advances our understanding of the JD-R model by examining the mediation of work pace in the unreasonable tasks—emotional exhaustion relationship.

The first job demand in our model is represented by unreasonable tasks, a form of illegitimate tasks and a work stressor (Thun et al., 2018). Unreasonable tasks are judged to be unreasonable because they either do not belong to the employee’s occupation or involve restrictive rules and require knowledge and skills the subject employee does not possess (Pindek et al., 2019a). The discerning criteria for unreasonable tasks include the following (Cheng et al., 2022): the task should be performed by someone else; the task is beyond the defined scope of responsibility or does not match the employee’s experience; the task will put the employees in an embarrassing situation; and the task is perceived as unfair. Unreasonable work tasks reduce job satisfaction (Muntz et al., 2019), a sense of meaning at work, engagement (Kilponen et al., 2021) and give rise to thoughts of injustice and imbalance in task division (Pindek et al., 2019a). Supervisor expectations and norms or organizational deficiencies (e.g. an understaffed department) are the primary reasons for the occurrence of unreasonable tasks (Fila and Eatough, 2020).

Unreasonable tasks mean more work (Pindek, 2019a,b), increase the number of total tasks the employee needs to carry out and reinforce “the feeling of having too much work” (Bramlage et al., 2021). As they are distracting (Effering et al., 2018), unreasonable tasks could disrupt employees’ regular work routine (Ma and Peng, 2019). Further, they evoke negative emotions, a sense of disrespect (Ahmed et al., 2018), produce strong negative affect and poor self-esteem (Sonntag and Lischetzke, 2018). When required to perform illegitimate tasks, employees get angry, anxious, develop a depressive mood (Fila and Eatough, 2020) and become irritated and resentful (Semmer et al., 2015).

We argue that unreasonable tasks specifically will make the employee work faster because they represent an additional workload requiring extra time to complete all assignments, both those deemed reasonable as well as unreasonable. Also, the accompanying negative emotions may further contribute to the increased speed of working. Work pace thus serves as the mechanism underlying the unreasonable tasks-exhaustion relationship.

The second job demand in our model, work pace, is captured by working at high speed, something which is expected in today’s ever faster society (Sullivan and Gershuny, 2018; Rosa, 2013) due to increased market competition, shorter production processes and performance pressure. Work pace is recognized as a quantitative job demand (Dediu et al., 2018) resulting in feelings of being overwhelmed (Schulte, 2014). This acceleration of society
is evident in various life roles and may partly be attributed to technological advances (Colvile, 2016). Such a quickening is reflected in the pattern of general progression of speed in time when a deadline is approaching (Lim and Murnighan, 1994), onboarding new employees in half the usual time (Bradt and Vonnegut, 2009) and the general glorification of speed and working. Recent studies highlight feelings of always being rushed, particularly among managerial staff (Sullivan and Gershuny, 2018).

At the forefront of the social acceleration debate is Rosa’s sociological framework on acceleration, captured as a macro phenomenon, which emphasizes acceleration of 1) the pace of life, 2) technology and 3) social change (Rosa, 2010). Sullivan and Gershuny (2018) summarised Rosa’s (Rosa, 2013) characteristics of the acceleration of pace in our daily lives as being manifest in: 1) behaving at a faster pace during the day; 2) the increased occurrence of multitasking; 3) elimination of pauses between individual actions; and 4) a greater feeling of time pressure associated with the increasing speed of life. This acceleration raises ethical questions when seeking to create workplaces facilitating sustainable growth and well-being. At work this has led to a reduction in breaks (Roberts, 2007), with individuals ranging from office workers to flight attendants reporting that their pace of work has accelerated, and that the latter, for example, now have less time to care for passengers (Ulferts et al., 2013). Given the prevalence of an increased tempo in the corporate landscape, the work pace in our model is viewed as an acceleration-related demand, i.e. a sub-category of job demands (Ulferts et al., 2013).

Apart from job demands, the extension of the original JD-R model introduces personal resources that help mitigate the negative impacts of job demands and predict employee role performance and well-being (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014). In our model, we do not test personal resources directly, which was the case in previous studies (e.g. Halbesleben et al., 2014). Instead, we investigate a mechanism, that helps restore personal resources and thus sustain extreme job demands, namely psychological detachment, an ability to disengage “oneself psychologically from work when being away from the workplace” (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2015, p. 3). Following a recent conceptualization (Meier and Cho, 2019), we view detachment as a “resource-based mechanism”, that ameliorates the detrimental effects of work pace on employees. Here we draw from conservation of resources theory (COR) (Hobfoll, 1989), which reveals the need of individuals to acquire, protect, enhance and retain their psychological resources. In situations where resources are threatened or insufficient, (e.g. in extreme job demands), individuals experience stress, which leads to negative outcomes. In other words, as job demands reduce an individual’s energy they cause a “loss spiral” (Hobfoll et al., 2018), one that prevents the individual from investing their time and efforts adequately in their work. By applying recovery strategies, employees can restore their mental resources and energy (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007), decreasing the physical and psychological costs caused by high job demands (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014). Unreasonable tasks are a threat to the self (Semmer et al., 2019), implying negative consequences for well-being, but in our model these negative consequences (i.e. exhaustion) could be buffered via detachment.

Development of the hypotheses
We assume unreasonable tasks will increase emotional exhaustion as this is a phenomenon largely produced by job characteristics (Kasekende et al., 2020). Since unreasonable tasks are a novel concept, the few studies available mostly investigate illegitimate tasks that include unreasonable tasks as one component. Along with other studies, Semmer et al. (2015) investigated illegitimate tasks as a source of work stress and found negative effects on mental health (Madsen et al., 2014). Following the suggestion of Semmer et al. (2015), in the JD-R model unreasonable tasks would qualify as demands associated with burnout, due to the associated mental and emotional effort.
Performing unreasonable tasks is regarded as a stressful work event and, when employees are faced with stressors, their decreased self-value can degrade their psychological well-being (Pindek et al., 2019a). With respect to unreasonable tasks in particular, previous studies showed that they increase sickness absenteeism (Thun et al., 2018), emotional exhaustion (Koch and Adler, 2018) and evoke negative emotional responses, specifically “a lot of stress”, “frustration”, “lack of respect” (Pindek et al., 2019a). This reflects the fact that employees believe they should not be expected to complete unreasonable tasks and the assignment of them to them is perceived as unfair and violating their identity (Semmer et al., 2010). Based on the evidence provided above, we expect that when employees perceive they need to perform tasks that do not fall within their core tasks, they will start to feel fatigued and emotionally drained.

H1. Unreasonable work tasks are positively related with emotional exhaustion.

The mediating role of work pace
We propose that work pace can help explain the link between unreasonable tasks and emotional exhaustion. Per previous studies, the presence of unreasonable tasks increases role overload (Bramlage et al., 2021) and decreases work engagement (Cheng et al., 2022). In our case, the employee needs to perform both regular (i.e. as per job description) as well as unreasonable tasks, which quantitatively means more work (Pindek, 2019a,b). To do so, they need to increase the pace of work as this enables fulfilment of these “extra” duties. Further, unreasonable tasks tend to include unjustifiable, restrictive rules, such as deadlines, which can see the work pace increase due to deadline itself (Andel et al., 2019). Indeed, previous studies confirm a positive relationship between unreasonable tasks and the perception of time pressure (Elfering et al., 2018). Finally, as unreasonable tasks evoke negative feelings (Ahmed et al., 2018) and disrupt self-worth (Sonnenstag and Lischetzke (2018), the employee may want to complete these fast(er) in order to come out of the irritating situation quickly.

Having to increase the speed of working on tasks throughout the workday may produce adverse effects for employees, draining their energy and resulting in psychological impairment. This proposition is consistent with the JD-R model, suggesting that job demands may result in strain and burnout (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Specifically, employees put greater effort into their work at greater costs to themselves, whether they realize that this is the case or not (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). A recent review demonstrated that quantitative intensification of work leads to decreases in well-being (Mauno et al., in press). Working faster namely forces employees to make extra use of their mental and emotional resources (Franke, 2015). An increased speed of working will emotionally deplete the employee and leave them feeling emotionally and psychologically drained. In sum, we contend that unreasonable tasks will cause emotional exhaustion through an increased speed of work as the employee will need to complete both their regular job tasks and the unreasonable ones within the same available amount of working time.

H2. Work pace mediates the relationship between unreasonable tasks and emotional exhaustion.

The moderating role of psychological detachment
The JD-R model suggests that job demands, which require an extra level of effort to deal with them may result in employee exhaustion. To avoid such costs, one can compensate with breaks or recovery activities after work (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Core recovery experience is known as psychological detachment – refraining from any work activities after work time (Sonnenstag and Fritz, 2015) – and helps gain a mental distance from work during
after-work hours and improves well-being (Singh et al., 2016). Employees lacking psychological detachment hold negative thoughts about their work (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2015), thereby increasing negative affect (Sianoja et al., 2018).

Psychological detachment was shown to mitigate the conflict – well-being relationship (Sonnentag et al., 2013). We argue that working at a high speed by employees with low psychological detachment will cause them to more quickly become emotionally exhausted. In other words, the pace of work will be a stronger driver of feelings of exhaustion; namely, not knowing how to switch off from work in the afternoon will lead employees to still think about the injustices entailed in unreasonable tasks. Albeit sparse, empirical evidence supports this reasoning. According to Sonnentag and Lischetzke (2018), illegitimate tasks are associated with unfavourable states (i.e. negative affect, low self-esteem) at the end of the workday, indirectly related to poor psychological detachment from work in the evening. This undermines the recovery from stressful events experienced in the workplace. Conversely, it may be assumed that for employees with high psychological detachment there will be a smaller likelihood that unreasonable tasks will cause exhaustion through an increased work pace.

H3. Psychological detachment moderates the indirect relationship between unreasonable tasks and emotional exhaustion, as mediated by the work pace. The less psychologically detached an employee is, the more positive the relationship.

Method

Sample
This study employed primary data collected from full-time employees in a European country. The data collection proceeded in accordance with the University guidelines for ethical conduct in research. Respondents were alumni of a triple-accredited public business school, which holds the three renowned international accreditations (i.e. EQUIS, AACSB, AMBA). The target population included alumni who excelled in their academic studies. As per the school’s yearly career surveys, they work as professionals or lower level managers in various different business functions (e.g. finance, accounting, marketing, business informatics, HRM) (SEB LU, 2019) and can thus be considered knowledge workers.

The respondents were contacted via email, had the purpose of the study explained to them and were invited to participate in an online survey. Informed consent was provided and participants could withdraw from the survey at any point. Contact details for questions and further information regarding the research were provided. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured.

The sample comprised 245 responses, with 60% female participants. On average, employees were 31 years old (SD = 6.17) and reported working 45 h per week (SD = 12.75). 48% of respondents had an undergraduate degree and 45% a graduate degree.

Measures
The survey instrument was purposefully designed so that responses were self-reported, because the variables in our model are rooted in individual perception. When inquiring about internal states, it is difficult to obtain responses outside of self-reports (Spector, 2019). For example, unreasonable tasks are conceptually considered as based on the perceptions of the focal individual. That said, an individual reporting how exhausted they are or how fast they work could potentially lead to inflated scores and the presence of common method bias. To partially alleviate these concerns we used established and valid scales. With regard to common method bias, Harman’s single-factor test showed that there are four distinct factors. Additionally, the correlation-based marker variable technique (Podsakoff et al., 2012) showed
that partial correlations between focal variables in our model do not change significantly when controlling for the marker variable (i.e. job opportunity).

Regarding the variables in our model, we asked the participants for information about their typical day at work and their feelings about work. Unless otherwise indicated, 5-point scales were applied, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

**Emotional exhaustion.** Nine items from the Burnout inventory (Maslach and Jackson, 1981) were used to measure this construct. Respondents marked how frequently they had experienced each item on a 5-point scale, where the anchors ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (daily). A sample item is: “I feel used up at the end of the workday.”

**Unreasonable tasks.** This variable was measured with four items from Bern Illegitimate Task Scale (Semmer et al., 2010). Respondents indicated how often they needed to perform certain tasks on 5-point scales ranging from 1 (never/very rarely) to 5 (very often). A sample item is: “Do you have work tasks to take care of, which you believe are going too far, and should not be expected from you?”

**Work pace.** The speed of work was measured with three items developed by (Pejtersen et al., 2010). A sample item is “Do you work at a high pace throughout the day?”

**Psychological detachment.** Psychological detachment from work was assessed using a four-item scale developed by Sonnentag and Fritz (2007). A sample item is: “I don’t think about work at all.”

**Control variables.** Age and average weekly work hours.

### Results

**Table 1** presents the descriptive statistics and correlations.

Following Preacher and Hayes (2004), we first tested the basic mediation model using bootstrapping procedures in the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2015). While the relationship between unreasonable tasks and work pace is positive and significant, the results also suggest the indirect relationship of unreasonable work tasks and exhaustion are significant at a 95% confidence interval ($F(3,189) = 6.58, p = 0.000$). Unreasonable work tasks, work pace and psychological detachment (in an interaction effect) as antecedents are statistically significant predictors of emotional exhaustion in the proposed moderated mediation model (**Table 2**), where the interaction effect is also significant ($\beta = -0.20, t = -2.57, p = 0.01$).

We identified conditional indirect effects of the mediator (work pace) and of unreasonable work on emotional exhaustion through a higher work pace, including psychological detachment after work as a moderator (**Table 3**). The conditional indirect effect of the independent variable (X) on the dependent (Y) represents the result of the conditional indirect effect of unreasonable tasks that quantifies the indirect effect of unreasonable tasks on emotional exhaustion through work pace with values of psychological detachment (−1SD, mean, +1SD) (Hayes, 2017). The conditional indirect effect of the mediator (work pace) is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Age</td>
<td>30.92</td>
<td>6.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Work hours</td>
<td>44.54</td>
<td>12.75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Unreasonable work tasks</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Work pace</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.16*</td>
<td>0.23***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Psychological detachment</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.16*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.51***</td>
<td>0.32***</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note(s):** *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.00**

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlations
statistically significant at −1SD and mean, whereas at +1SD it is not statistically significant. It is the same with the conditional indirect effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable.

Among those who have relatively low psychological detachment (−1SD) the indirect effect of the unreasonable tasks is positive (β = 0.12, [0.05, 0.20]), meaning the unreasonable tasks result in greater emotional exhaustion because, relative to those who are not given unreasonable tasks at work, those who do, work quicker (β = 0.49, t (186) = 4.27, p = 0.000), which in turn translates to a higher level of emotional exhaustion (because the coefficient of work pace is positive). The indirect effect of unreasonable tasks is significant and lower (β = 0.29, t (186) = 3.28, p = 0.001) among those who exhibited moderate psychological detachment, implying that people who experience unreasonable tasks at work, compared to those who do not, work slower when moderately psychologically detached, yet still feel emotionally exhausted. At relatively high values of psychological detachment (+1SD), the indirect effect of unreasonable tasks is not significant, suggesting that there is no significant indirect effect of the mediator work pace on the path between unreasonable tasks and emotional exhaustion when psychological detachment is high.

| Table 2. Results for the Mediation Model and the Moderated Mediation Modela,b |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
| Unreasonable work tasks → Emotional exhaustion | Unreasonable work tasks → Work pace | Unreasonable work tasks → Work pace → Emotional exhaustion | Unreasonable work tasks → Work pace → Emotional exhaustion |
| (Constant) | 0.16 (0.38) | 3.50 (0.31)*** | 0.20 (0.37) | −0.15 (0.38) |
| Age | −0.02 (0.01) | −0.01 (0.01) | −0.02 (0.01) | −0.02 (0.01) |
| Work hours per week | 0.01 (0.01) | 0.01 (0.00)* | 0.01 (0.01) | 0.01 (0.01) |
| Unreasonable work tasks | 0.65 (0.08)*** | 0.24 (0.06)*** | 0.57 (0.08)*** | 0.59 (0.08)*** |
| Work pace | 0.31 (0.09)** | 0.29 (0.09)** | 0.29 (0.09)** | 0.29 (0.09)** |
| Psychological detachment | 0.06 (0.06) | 0.06 (0.06) | −0.06 (0.06) | −0.06 (0.06) |
| Work pace × Psychological detachment | −0.20 (0.08)* | −0.20 (0.08)* | −0.20 (0.08)* | −0.20 (0.08)* |
| R² | 0.53 | 0.31 | 0.33 | 0.31 |
| F (df) | 24.42 (3) | 6.81 (3) | 22.70 (4) | 6.58 (3) |

Note(s): a Standard errors are presented next to the fixed effects in parentheses. b Dependent variable: exhaustion ***p = 0.00, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05

| Table 3. Conditional indirect effects for the conditional process model |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Psychological Detachment | Conditional indirect effect of work pace (M) | Conditional indirect effects of unreasonable work tasks (X) on emotional exhaustion (Y) | BC 95% bootstrapped CI Lower Upper |
| −0.9923 | 0.4891*** | 0.1174 | 0.0497a | 0.1988 |
| 0.0340 | 0.2874*** | 0.0690 | 0.0220a | 0.1321 |
| 1.0603 | 0.0868 | 0.0206 | −0.0436 | 0.0932 |

Note(s): ***p = 0.00, **p < 0.01
a Confidence intervals that do not contain zero are deemed significant.
Figure 1 shows the indirect effect. Emotional exhaustion is low when the pace of work is low and psychological detachment is low. However, at a higher work pace, emotional exhaustion increases when psychological detachment is low. The steepness of the low psychological detachment line indicates the indirect effect evident from the above analysis of low and moderate levels of psychological detachment. Emotional exhaustion is presumably low at a low work pace and with high psychological detachment while at high work pace, exhaustion slightly increases when the psychological detachment is high. We can therefore assume those who work more quickly are more emotionally exhausted if they are highly psychologically detached, but in a less significant way than with low psychological detachment (as indicated by a flatter line). However, high levels of psychological detachment indicate non-significant indirect effects of illegitimate tasks.

Discussion
In times of increased performance expectations and the realities of a high-speed society, it is essential to continue exploring how different working conditions facilitate and/or undermine employee well-being, which is recognized as a key sustainable development goal by the United Nations (Di Fabio, 2017). In this study, we showed that unreasonable tasks lead to increased emotional exhaustion via increased work pace, and complemented the few existing studies that find illegitimate tasks are a source of stress (Semmer et al., 2015) and mental-health issues (Madsen et al., 2014), leading to poor work performance (Björk et al., 2013). While emotional exhaustion is an established construct, unreasonable tasks have only been introduced recently and investigated in a surprisingly small number of studies, chiefly as a component of illegitimate tasks (Semmer et al., 2015). A recent study showed that while illegitimate tasks have two components (Pindek et al., 2019a; Semmer et al., 2015) unreasonable tasks (as explored in this study) proved to have stronger relationships with outcomes than unnecessary tasks in general (Semmer et al., 2015) and thus appear to be more relevant (Semmer et al., 2015; Koch and Adler, 2018). While unreasonable tasks themselves have a negative connotation, leading to undesirable outcomes as demonstrated in this and previous studies (e.g. Semmer et al., 2010; Semmer et al., 2015), a recent study showed a positive correlation between such tasks and innovation (Koch and Adler, 2018), suggesting there are also ample opportunities to consider the possible positive effects of unreasonable tasks.

We also established the predictive value of work pace as a contemporary job demand and confirmed it as the underlying mechanism (i.e. mediator) in the unreasonable tasks—emotional exhaustion relationship. Greater work pace occurs due to increased performance

![Figure 1. The moderating effect of psychological detachment on the work pace-emotional exhaustion relationship](image-url)
pressure, which in turn leads to more workload and less time available to do the work, increasing the pressure for an even higher work pace (Kristensen et al., 2004). We found that unreasonable work tasks push the individual to work faster, which further adds to exhaustion. Therefore, we expand the literature on job demands by exploring the consequences of a novel work factor which is common in today’s speed-up society yet has only recently gained traction in this literature. With this we add to the growing literature on concepts related to acceleration in working life (Ab Wahab et al., 2020), intensified job demands (Kubicek et al., 2015) and more broadly the issue of work intensification (Mauno et al., in press).

We underscore the role of psychological detachment as a relevant moderator in the process leading to employee emotional exhaustion, which is particularly useful in an era of high job demands (Sonnentag et al., 2010). While in previous studies psychological detachment directly predicted well-being outcomes (Sianoja et al., 2018), here we posited that it should have a moderating effect on the mediation following recent studies (Boekhorst et al., 2017). We observed that individuals low in detachment are much more prone to the detrimental effects of a changing work pace. In particular, their response in the form of exhaustion is much more volatile. On the other hand, employees who can switch off at the end of the workday may be better at initially detecting the different workplace conditions (i.e. situations of low or high work paces) and are thus not as affected by these changes (as indicated by the gradual inclination of the slope gradually inclined slope). With respect to the emotional exhaustion that is experienced, we found that psychological detachment does indeed serve as an effective way to cope with increased job demands and combat exhaustion (Hobfoll, 1989). As personal resources such as physical or cognitive energy are finite, psychological detachment facilitates adaptation to increased job demands, breaks the negative loss spiral and reduces the feelings of emotional exhaustion (Hobfoll et al., 2018). With this study, we respond to calls (Demerouti and Bakker, 2011) for empirical papers that extend the JD-R model by including personal resources to help explain how employees risk burnout if simultaneously challenged by high job demands and low resources. Our research is also in line with suggestions to search for the theoretical basis of the effect of moderators in the JD-R model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017) and the limited existing evidence on the interactions between personal resources and resource-based mechanisms and job demands (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014).

Practical implications
HR managers must take account of the potential existence of unreasonable tasks and the fact that they reflect organizational inefficiencies (Pindek et al., 2019a) and sub-optimal business processes affecting employee and organizational effectiveness. Employees themselves have the greatest knowledge of the procedures involved in completing different tasks and the conditions that allow work to run smoothly. They may also identify the redundancies and disturbances and give a realistic account of the frequency of tasks that fall outside the scope of one’s job. Such information could be obtained through HR workshops involving employees and managers, thereby allowing more accurate job descriptions to be produced. By talking with job crafters, additional information about unreasonable tasks may be acquired. Unreasonable tasks tend to be attributed to poor management (Pindek et al., 2019a), making it worthwhile to revisit the delegation of tasks. With a systematic focus on the mismatches in delegated tasks, managers can effectively prevent exhaustion, targeted at reducing the inequities of the job.

HR practitioners can attempt to raise awareness of the negative effects of the high-speed society (Rosa, 2010). Employees should be educated and managers sensitized to the performance challenges raised by their employees working at high speed. For example,
discussions could help identify conditions when employees increase the speed of their work and brainstorm suggestions via mentoring and reverse mentoring on how a higher speed of work can be dealt with. Work pace need not be promoted as a positive factor and employees, no matter their age group, not reprimanded for not working at extra high speed.

Our findings reveal that to manage such demanding work conditions knowing how to switch off from work during one’s non-work time is beneficial. We suggest taking micro steps to detach and conduct a personal experiment over a month. Steps could involve deliberate segmentation between the professional and personal sides of work, employing rituals of separation between work and non-work (i.e. not taking work home, putting away all work-related documents on home desks), engaging in hobbies (Mojza et al., 2011).

The effects of individual exhaustion on colleagues is also worth noting. Absenteeism due to exhaustion means that colleagues need to take care of the missing employee’s work. Taking on additional tasks can, if prolonged, also result in the perception of unreasonable tasks and, as our research shows, consequently in exhaustion. Being stuck with these unreasonable tasks that represent additional work could disable psychological detachment due to the sheer amount of work involved and create a vicious cycle.

**Limitations and future research**

While this study offers new knowledge, it is not without limitations. First, we used self-reports, which might cause concerns with common method bias. Therefore, in the planning stage we paid attention to including items that were reverse-coded. Respondents were also assured anonymity and their personal data were not required at any stage of the survey. Moreover, they were told that only results on an aggregate level would be reported, while individual responses would not be disclosed (Podsakoff et al., 2012). While the studied phenomena are person-specific and respondents themselves report on their internal states based on their own perceptions, obtaining a supervisor or colleague’s perception of job demands could also be informative and thus be explored in future studies. Attempts to obtain objective measures on some of the variables could further increase the validity of the results. Investigating these relationships in teams would also provide another perspective on these issues. Second, this study employed a sample of knowledge workers with a business background to test the proposed hypotheses. Therefore, researchers could investigate the strength of the relationships among different occupational groups, job types as well as industries. This would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the relationships among the observed variables. Third, the research design was cross-sectional and did not allow causality to be established. Nevertheless, as we undertook an exploratory study to investigate a novel construct, the approach was appropriate (Spector, 2019). We recommend that the relationships be investigated through longitudinal studies, observing if and how pervasive the unreasonable tasks and speed of work are over time, and the ways in which this is reflected in exhaustion. Daily diary studies could also be undertaken to measure the immediate effects of psychological detachment and changes in the effectiveness of this personal resource from the start to the end of the working week. Finally, the vicious cycle of taking on extra tasks, and, over time, perceiving them as unreasonable, as explained in the previous section could also be empirically examined in the future.

**References**


SEB LU (2019), Alumni Survey Report, School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana.


About the authors
Katarina Katja Mihelič is a Full Professor of Management and Organization at the School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana. Her research interests include organizational behavior, (un)ethical behaviors, work-family dynamics and psychological contracts. Her work has been published in international scholarly outlets such as Human Resource Management, Journal of Business Ethics, Personnel Review, Business Ethics: A European Review, and Creativity Research Journal, among others. She has led the Employers’ work package in an international, project on Global Entrepreneurial Talent Management (GETM3), funded by H2020 scheme (MSCA-RISE). Katarina Katja Mihelič is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: katja.mihelic@ef.uni-lj.si

Nada Zupan is a Full Professor of Management at the School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her main research interests include strategic HRM, human capital, talent

Ajda Merkuž is Research Assistant of Management and Organization at the School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana (SEB LU). As a young researcher, she is interested in flexible work arrangements, work-life balance and well-being. Her master thesis on effects of workplace flexibility and core self-evaluation on organizational citizenship behavior has been awarded with the Prešeren award of the SEB LU.