The Influence of Workload on Work-life Conflict: Empirical Evidence from Accountants

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Abstract: Increasing professional demands have contributed to growing work overload and to intensified conflict between professional and personal life. The accountancy profession, marked by strict deadlines, constant legal and tax requirements, and pressure from clients and supervisors, is particularly conducive to this phenomenon, and the topic remains underexplored in the national literature. This study analyses the influence of work overload on work–life conflict amongst Portuguese accountants, examining how work overload limits the time and energy available for family responsibilities and leisure. The convenience sample comprises 272 Portuguese accountants with data collected via an online questionnaire distributed on social media and publicised by the Order of Certified Accountants. Validated scales measured work overload and work–life conflict, the latter decomposed into three dimensions: work–family, family–work and work–leisure conflict. Data were analysed using confirmatory factor analysis, Pearson correlations and linear regression. Regression results confirm work overload as a positive, statistically significant predictor of work–life conflict across all three dimensions. The strongest effect emerged for work–family conflict, followed by work–leisure conflict. The effect on family–work conflict was weaker. The study's main contribution is its empirical application, still scarce, of the work–life conflict literature to the accountancy sector in Portugal, offering robust regression-based evidence on how work overload differentially affects family and leisure domains. Practically, findings provide organisations a well-founded basis for designing appropriate human resource policies, including equitable task redistribution, flexible working arrangements and stronger organisational support.

Keywords: Work overload, Work–family conflict, Work–leisure conflict, Accountants

1. Introduction

Over recent decades, economic, social and technological transformations have led to profound changes in the organisation of work. Increasing professional demands, the intensification of tasks and the need for constant availability have contributed to a situation of greater workplace pressure (Guest, 2002). This context often leads to work overload, defined as a level of demand that exceeds an individual's capacity to cope with assigned tasks and responsibilities (Kennell, 2021). At the same time, the conflict between work and personal life has come to feature prominently in the literature, being defined as the incompatibility between the demands of work and responsibilities outside it, including family, leisure and other areas of life (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985).

This conflict is two-way, with work potentially interfering with personal life and vice versa, although research shows that work demands tend to have a greater impact on personal life (Boamah et al., 2022). Excessive workloads and a lack of time to balance different roles contribute to imbalances that result in stress, emotional exhaustion and dissatisfaction with life and work (Shields and Chen, 2021).

The accountancy profession is characterised by periods of high workload, strict deadlines, constant legal and tax requirements, and pressure from clients and supervisors (Paul and Nazareth, 2010). This situation exposes professionals to heavy workloads, often accompanied by long working hours and limited flexibility, increasing the likelihood of experiencing work–life conflicts (Rafiq et al., 2022).

Building on this, the present study analyses the influence of work overload on work–life conflict amongst Portuguese accountants, distinguishing between three dimensions of this conflict: work–family, family–work and work–leisure conflict. In doing so, it examines how work overload limits the time and energy available for family responsibilities and leisure activities, and whether its impact is indeed asymmetric across domains, as boundary theory would predict. The study contributes to the literature by providing robust, regression-based empirical evidence from an occupational group and national context in which this relationship has been little

studied, and by extending the analysis to the leisure domain alongside the more commonly examined family domain.

2. Background

2.1 Work Overload

Work overload occurs when a professional must deal with simultaneous demands from various sources, such as managers, clients, colleagues or external organisations. This multitude of expectations can lead to psychological conflict, as different responsibilities compete for the worker's time and energy, increasing pressure and work overload (Duxbury et al., 2014). Initially, the concept focused on factors such as a lack of clarity regarding roles (role ambiguity) and staff shortages; it was subsequently broadened to include excessive workload and time pressure more generally (Anam et al., 2020; Rafiq et al., 2022).

Workload intensity and frequency may vary, but the real risk arises when overload persists over time, exposing workers to constant pressure in their day-to-day lives (Williams et al., 2021); the problem is not the work itself but the demands that exceed human capacity. In highly demanding sectors, workload tends to be heavier, particularly due to a lack of staff to share tasks or an uneven distribution of work, whereby some employees end up shouldering a heavier burden than others (Williams et al., 2021). Deliberate understaffing and the setting of unrealistic task criteria are among the main contributing factors, together with a lack of managerial support, unclear role expectations and excessive time pressure (Kennell, 2021). Staff reductions due to redundancies compound this further, as remaining employees take on additional duties, a situation strategically maintained by management to minimise costs, which results in more responsibilities with fewer resources, longer working hours and increasing demands from clients and supervisors (Williams et al., 2021).

2.2 Work–life Conflict and Theoretical Framework

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) suggest that work–family conflict arises when the demands of roles at work and within the family become incompatible, hindering performance in both. This conflict can manifest itself in three main ways. Time-based conflict occurs when time devoted to one role interferes with the fulfilment of the other, due to long, inflexible working hours or family responsibilities. Strain-based conflict occurs when stress generated in one role hinders performance in the other, owing to factors such as psychological demands or physical strain at work, burnout, a lack of family support and marital conflicts. Behaviour-based conflict occurs when the behaviours required by one role prevent the fulfilment of another, as a result of the attitudes and actions expected in one role coming into conflict with the expectations of another.

These mechanisms are directly implicated in the demands facing accountants: long working hours, continuous shifts and weekend work significantly undermine individuals' ability to maintain a healthy work–life balance (Hui et al., 2023; Mansour and Tremblay, 2016), reducing the time and opportunities available for physical and mental recovery and leading to higher levels of exhaustion, fatigue and health problems (Amazue and Lawrence, 2013; Lott and Wöhrmann, 2022). Role ambiguity compounds this time-based pressure: a lack of clarity regarding job expectations increases uncertainty and demands greater mental effort, which in turn affects the attention available for family roles (Amazue and Lawrence, 2013; Lott and Wöhrmann, 2022). The demands associated with one's professional role thus conflict with the pressures arising from family responsibilities, giving rise to tensions between the roles of employee, spouse and parent, particularly when it is necessary to work overtime or take work home (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985).

The Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) offers a theoretical account of why these time and strain-based pressures generate conflict. It argues that people strive to acquire, retain, protect and build up resources they value, and that stress arises when these resources are threatened, actually lost, or when a significant investment of resources fails to yield the expected return. Excessive demands at work take up time and energy that would otherwise be needed for family and leisure, leading to conflict; this conflict, in turn, causes greater stress, which consumes even more resources, fuelling a vicious cycle (Hobfoll, 1989).

Whilst COR theory explains the mechanism through which work overload depletes the resources needed for personal life, it does not, on its own, explain why this depletion tends to flow more strongly from work to personal life than in the opposite direction. Boundary Theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) addresses this asymmetry directly: it proposes that the boundary surrounding the work domain tends to be more protected by organisational norms and formal expectations, whereas the family and leisure domains are more informal and therefore more easily crossed by demands originating at work. Although the conflict between domains is bidirectional, this asymmetry in boundary permeability helps explain why work tends to exert a stronger

influence on personal life than personal life exerts on work (Abendroth and Dulk, 2011; Boamah et al., 2022; Jang and Zippay, 2011). Taken together, COR theory and Boundary Theory offer complementary explanations of the phenomenon under study: the former accounts for the depletion of resources caused by work overload, and the latter accounts for the direction in which that depletion is most strongly felt.

2.3 Hypotheses Development

Building on this framework, work overload is expected to be positively associated with work–life conflict, consistent with COR theory's resource-depletion logic. Work overload is positioned as a first-order construct. Moreover, given the greater permeability of the boundaries surrounding family and leisure relative to those surrounding work (Ashforth et al., 2000), this impact is expected to be stronger when personal life is affected by work than when work is affected by personal life. As the present study distinguishes between three dimensions of work–life conflict — work–family, family–work and work–leisure conflict — this asymmetry is examined across all three.

As such, it is hypothesised:

Hypothesis 1: Work overload is positively related to work–life conflict amongst accountants.

Hypothesis 2: The impact of work overload on work-life conflict (work–family and work–leisure conflict) is greater than its impact on life-work conflict (family–work conflict).

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

The convenience sample is composed of 272 individuals (n=272). Respondents are Portuguese accountants. Regarding gender, 82,4% are female, 17,6% are male. 37,1% of accountants are from northern Portugal. Regarding age, 37,5% are between 40 and 49 years old and 25,4% are between 50 and 59 years old. 68% of professionals are married or in a civil partnership. The majority of accountants have dependants or children in their care (61,02%). In relation to academic qualifications, 76,8% have a bachelor's degree and 16,5% a master's degree.

3.2 Measures

This study employs a questionnaire survey. All scales were subjected to a translation and back-translation process conducted by two independent bilingual translators, following standard back-translation procedures to ensure conceptual and linguistic equivalence between the original English versions and the Portuguese version.

Work overload was assessed through four dimensions. Role ambiguity was measured using a four-item scale adapted from Lequeurre et al. (2013) (e.g., "I am unsure about what is and isn't my responsibility"). Staff shortages, excessive workload and time pressure were each measured using three-item scales adapted from Duxbury et al. (2014) (e.g., "There aren't enough staff to allow for breaks during working hours (e.g. lunch, coffee breaks)"; "There is a heavy workload, such as forms to submit and emails to reply to"; "It is difficult to get everything done within the time available"). All items were rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always)**.** A composite work overload score was computed as the mean of all 13 items across the four dimensions. To measure work–family conflict and family–work conflict, the scale developed by Haslam et al. (2015) was used. E.g.: My job prevents me from spending enough quality time with my family; My job has a negative impact on my family life; My family concerns or responsibilities often distract me at work; My family has a negative impact on my day-to-day work tasks. To measure work–leisure conflict, the scale developed by Wong and Lin (2007) was used. E.g.: I don’t have enough time for leisure activities because of my work; I don’t have the energy to take part in leisure activities because of my work. The scale ranges from 1 – I completely disagree to 5 – I completely agree.

3.3 Procedures

The questionnaire was administered online using Google Forms during June and July 2025. It was distributed in a Facebook group called “Everyone counts on Paula Franco”, administered by Dr. Paula Franco, president of the Portuguese Order of Certified Accountants. Subsequently, the Portuguese Order of Certified Accountants was asked to publicise the research on its social media networks (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn). This study is cross-sectional. All variables were measured using responses obtained from the same respondents through a self-report approach.

4. Results

4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis Work-life Conflict

A Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted for all dimensions using IBM SPSS Statistics, with principal component extraction and varimax rotation. Coefficients below ,50 were excluded to ensure a clearer factor structure.

A three-factor structure was found for work-life conflict (table 1), in line with prior research: work-family conflict (α = ,932), family-work conflict (α = ,851), and work-leisure conflict (α = ,881). The KMO value (,833) confirmed adequate sampling, and the scale showed good reliability (α = ,871).

Table 1: Principal component analysis of the work–life conflict scale

Items	Factors		
	Work-family conflict	**Family-work conflict**	**Work-leisure conflict**
1. I feel that my work prevents me from spending enough quality time with my family.	,898		
2. I feel that, at the end of the day, I don't have any time left to do the things I'd like to do at home (for example, housework).	,873		
3. I feel that my family suffers as a result of my work commitments.	,919		
4. I feel that my work has a negative impact on my family life.	,814		
6. I feel that my performance at work suffers as a result of my personal and family commitments.		,712	
7. I feel that my family concerns or responsibilities often distract me at work.		,779	
8. I think that if I didn't have a family, I'd be a better employee.		,763	
9. I feel that my family has a negative impact on my day-to-day work tasks.		,852	
10. I find it difficult to concentrate on my work because I am too exhausted due to my family responsibilities.		,828	
13. I feel I don't have the energy to take part in leisure activities because of my work.			,858
15. I feel that, because of my work, I am never in the right frame of mind to take part in leisure activities.			,844

4.2 Correlations and Regression Analysis

4.2.1 Correlations and regression analysis between work overload and work-life conflict

The work overload variable was obtained through the mean of scale items. This aggregate measure offers a synthetic analysis consistent with the proposed conceptual model. Work overload is positioned as a first-order construct (α = ,889).

Correlations and regression analysis between work overload and work-family conflict

After removing the outliers a significant positive correlation was found (r =,484; p < ,01), indicating that higher perceived work overload is associated with greater work-family conflict.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations between overall work overload and work-family conflict after outlier removal

	N	Mean	SD	Pearson correlations	
				work overload	work-family conflict
work overload	268	4,142	,884	_	_
work-family conflict	268	3,125	,795	,484**	_

** p < ,01

A linear regression analysis was conducted using the Enter method to examine the relationship between work overload and work-family conflict.

The linear regression revealed a positive and significant relationship between work overload and work-family conflict. As shown in Table 3, the unstandardized coefficient for work overload was B = ,539 (t = 9.026; p < ,001), indicating that each one-unit increase in work overload is associated with a ,539-unit increase in work-family conflict. The constant (B = 2.458) was also statistically significant (p < ,001), representing the predicted level of work-family conflict when work overload is zero.

The model equation is therefore:

Work-Family Conflict = 2,458 + ,539 × Work Overload

Table 3: Regression Analysis between work overload and work-family conflict

	Non padronized coefficients		**Padronized coefficients**	***t***	***p***
Model	**B**	**standard error**	**Beta**		
work-family conflict (constant)	2,458	,192		12,773	,000
Work overload	,539	,060	,484	9,026	,000

Dependent variable: work-family conflict

Overall, the model shows that work overload has a positive and statistically significant effect on perceived work-family conflict, confirming the relevance of this factor in the occupational context under study.

Correlations and regression analysis between work overload and family-work conflict

After removing the outliers a significant positive correlation was found (r = ,197; p < ,01), indicating that higher perceived work overload is associated with greater work-family conflict.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations between overall work overload and family-work conflict after outlier removal

	N	Mean	SD	Pearson correlations	
				workload	family-work conflict
work overload	271	2,168	,924	_	_
family-work conflict	271	3,123	,785	,197**	_

** p < ,01

A linear regression analysis was conducted using the Enter method to examine the relationship between work overload and family-work conflict.

The linear regression revealed a positive and significant relationship between work overload and work-family. As shown in Table 5, the unstandardized coefficient for work overload was B = ,232 (t = 3.295; p = ,001), indicating that each one-unit increase in workload is associated with a ,232-unit increase in family-work conflict. The constant (B = 1,445) was also statistically significant (p < ,001), representing the predicted level of family-work conflict when work overload is zero.

The model equation is therefore:

Family-Work Conflict = 1,445 + 0,232 × Work Overload

Table 5: Regression Analysis between Work Overload and Family-work Conflict

	Non padronized coefficients		**Padronized coefficients**	**t**	**p**
Model	**B**	**standard error**	**Beta**		
Family-Work Conflict (constant)	1,445	,226		6,378	,000
Work overload	,232	,070	,197	3,295	,001

Dependent variable: Family-Work Conflict

These results confirm that work overload is a relevant predictor of family-work conflict.

Correlations and regression analysis between work overload and work-leisure conflict

A significant positive correlation was found (r =,435; p < ,01), indicating that higher perceived work overload is associated with greater work-leisure conflict.

Table 6: Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations between overall workload and work-leisure conflict

	N	**Mean**	**SD**	**Pearson correlations**	
				work overload	**work-leisure conflict**
work overload	272	3,789	1,121	**-**	_
work-leisure conflict	272	3,115	,794	,435**	_

** p < ,01

A linear regression analysis was conducted using the Enter method to examine the relationship between work overload and work-leisure conflict.

Regression coefficient analysis (Table 7) confirmed that the model was adequate and that work overload had a positive and significant effect on work-leisure conflict (B = ,615; t = 7.946; p < ,001). Each one-unit increase in work overload was associated with a ,615-unit increase in work-leisure conflict. The constant (B = 1.874) was also statistically significant (p < ,05), representing the predicted level of work-leisure conflict when work overload is zero.

The model equation is therefore:

Work-Leisure Conflict = 1,874 + ,615 × Work Overload

Table 7: Regression Analysis between work overload and work-leisure conflict.

	Non padronized coefficients		Padronized coefficients	*t*	*p*
Model	**B**	**standard error**	**Beta**		
work-leisure conflict (constant)	1,874	,249		7,535	,000
Work overload	,615	,077	,435	7,946	,000

Dependent variable: work-leisure conflict

These results confirm that work overload is a significant predictor of work-leisure conflict, reinforcing that higher job demands reduce individuals' time and availability for leisure activities, thereby undermining work-life balance. Overall, these findings support Hypotheses 1 and 2, demonstrating that work overload contributes to increased conflict between the professional and personal spheres.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The measurement model performed well: the confirmatory factor analysis retained a coherent three-factor structure for work–life conflict (work–family, family–work and work–leisure), and both the work overload and conflict scales showed satisfactory internal consistency. This gives confidence that the pattern of relationships reported below reflects substantive differences between domains of conflict rather than measurement artefacts.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that work overload would be positively related to work–life conflict amongst accountants. This was confirmed across all three dimensions, with work overload emerging as a significant positive predictor of work–family conflict (β = ,484), work–leisure conflict (β = ,435) and, more modestly, family–work conflict (β = ,197). Rather than treating this as a set of isolated confirmations, these findings can be read as direct empirical support for the resource-depletion mechanism proposed by Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989). COR theory holds that individuals seek to protect a finite pool of resources – principally, in this context, time and energy – and that stress and conflict arise when these resources are threatened, depleted or invested without adequate return. Work overload, by definition, represents a sustained drain on exactly these resources: accountants facing deadline pressure, high task volume and constant client and supervisor demands are left with correspondingly less time and psychological energy to invest in family and leisure roles. The consistency of the positive effect across all three outcome variables is therefore not merely a replication of prior findings but a demonstration that resource depletion generalises across the domains into which the depleted resources would otherwise have flowed. In this sense, the results support and reinforce the core logic of COR theory rather than simply corroborating it as a background reference. The results are also consistent with previous studies (Amazue and Lawrence, 2013; Lott and Wöhrmann, 2022).

The results also allow the two principal conflict-generating mechanisms identified by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) to be distinguished empirically. Time-based conflict – in which time devoted to the work role is, by definition, unavailable for other roles – is the most direct explanation for the strong effect of overload on work–leisure conflict, since leisure activities are typically the most discretionary and therefore the first to be sacrificed when working hours expand or intensify. Strain-based conflict – in which fatigue, tension or anxiety generated in one role is carried into another – offers the more plausible explanation for the effect on work–family conflict, since family life is less easily postponed than leisure but is nonetheless vulnerable to the emotional and physical exhaustion that accompanies sustained overload.

Hypothesis 2 anticipated that the impact of work overload would be greater on work-to-life conflict than on life-to-work conflict, and this asymmetry was observed. This pattern corroborates and extends the boundary-permeability argument advanced by Ashforth et al. (2000). Their account holds that the boundary surrounding the work role is comparatively impermeable, being reinforced by organisational norms, formal schedules and external accountability (to clients, supervisors and regulatory deadlines), whereas the boundaries surrounding family and leisure roles are more informal and therefore more easily crossed by demands originating in the

work domain. The results are also consistent with previous studies (Abendroth and Dulk, 2011; Boamah et al., 2022; Jang and Zippay, 2011).

The present findings show that the asymmetry is not confined to the general work–family distinction typically examined in the literature but extends to leisure, a domain that is, if anything, even less formally protected than family life and therefore even more exposed to spillover from overload. These theoretical mechanisms also help to explain why the accountancy context appears to intensify the effects reported here relative to less deadline-driven occupations. Because tax and reporting deadlines are externally imposed and largely non-negotiable, accountants have limited scope to buffer overload by renegotiating work boundaries, which, from a COR perspective, removes one of the principal coping routes (resource substitution or boundary renegotiation) through which employees in more flexible occupations might otherwise protect family and leisure time. This is consistent with, but goes beyond, prior descriptive accounts of the profession's demands (Paul and Nazareth, 2010; Rafiq et al., 2022): the present results suggest a specific mechanism – restricted boundary control – through which occupational characteristics translate into the asymmetric conflict pattern observed.

Theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study supports the applicability of COR theory and boundary theory to a professional context in which resource loss is structurally embedded in the nature of the work itself, and it qualifies boundary theory by showing that the permeability asymmetry it predicts also holds for leisure, not only for family. Redistributing tasks more equitably and calibrating workloads to realistic capacity would address the resource-depletion pathway directly, by reducing the drain on time and energy at its source. Flexible working arrangements, teleworking and time-banking schemes would address the boundary-permeability pathway, by giving employees greater control over where the work boundary is drawn, rather than leaving it fixed by external deadlines. Organisational support – supervisory understanding, realistic deadline-setting and adequate staffing – can further be understood, in COR terms, as a resource-replenishing mechanism.

Limitations and future research. The cross-sectional, self-report design does not permit causal inference, and the data were collected during a period of seasonally elevated workload in the profession, which may have inflated reported levels of both overload and conflict. All the variables were measured from the same respondents at a single point in time and the study may be susceptible to common method bias. The convenience sample, recruited via professional social media channels, may also over-represent accountants already engaged with work–life balance issues, introducing a degree of self-selection bias. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs capable of testing the resource-depletion and boundary-permeability mechanisms proposed here more directly, for instance through diary studies capturing within-person fluctuations in overload and conflict over the tax cycle. It could be important incorporating moderating and mediating variables such as perceived organisational support, schedule control or autonomy as resource-replenishing or boundary-strengthening factors.

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