

Chinese Enterprise Overtime Working Problems and Its Solutions: Case of Jinan City, Shangdon Province, China

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Abstract

In China's fast-expanding economy, extended working hours have become a hallmark of many corporate cultures. This practice, often labeled the "996" work regimen (9 am to 9 pm, six days a week), has increasingly been scrutinized. Hence, this study aimed to (1) examine the prevalence of overtime work in Chinese enterprises, (2) identify the challenges associated with excessive overtime, and (3) explore potential solutions. Our research focused on 15 employees from three private firms in software technology, metallurgy, and energy-saving investments, all located in Jinan, Shandong Province. These participants were chosen for in-depth interviews, and data was collected via interview sheets. Subsequent content analysis revealed the following:

1. Overtime work is widespread in Chinese enterprises, particularly in major urban areas and specific sectors. Even though organizations outline tasks to be completed within regular work hours, employees frequently resort to overtime to meet job demands due to impending deadlines, client requirements, and overtime pay policies. However, the government has recently advocated for balanced work hours and urged firms to enhance work environments to minimize overtime.

2. The challenges stemming from excessive overtime in Chinese companies include 1) adverse impacts on worker health, 2) diminished life quality for employees, 3) strained familial ties, and 4) infringements on the legitimate rights of workers.

3. Potential remedies to address the overtime issue include 1) refining vocational and technical training systems, 2) strengthening human resource management strategies, 3) developing a comprehensive childcare framework, and 4) ensuring proper protection of employee rights.

Keywords: overtime working; Chinese enterprises; Jinan City; Shandong Province; solution

Introduction

China has witnessed astounding economic growth following its reform policy and opening up. In 1978, before its meteoric rise, China's GDP stood at a mere 364.5 billion Yuan, placing it 10th globally. By 2000, this figure had surged to 10 trillion Yuan; in 2012, it surpassed 50 trillion Yuan. Despite the setbacks of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, China

showcased a swift economic recovery, registering a 2.6% growth in its GDP, which tipped over 100 trillion Yuan, landing at 101.6 trillion Yuan. In just over four decades since initiating its reforms, China's economy has expanded by 274, surpassing significant economies like Germany and Japan. It only trails behind the United States' global economic standings (Chen, 2022).

The burgeoning growth of our economy can be attributed to the relentless efforts of our workforce. In 2016, 69.42% of China's population participated in the labor force. On average, a worker clocks in 44.2 hours every week. 60% worked beyond 40 hours weekly, and over 40% exceeded 50 hours. China has long been known for its high labor force participation rate and extended working hours. Working overtime has recently become a standard practice, shaping the workplace culture. Indeed, starting one's workday punctually has become an anomaly. While overtime has become the new normal, it does offer certain benefits at our nation's current developmental stage. On a personal level, overtime equates to additional income, potentially leading to recognition and promotion opportunities. It helps businesses cut employment costs and enhance their marketplace competitive standing. The rapid emergence of new business models, like China's Internet Plus, further underscores the role of overtime. It accelerates labor productivity, enabling firms to carve out market shares quickly. Societally speaking, overtime has contributed to an uptick in the GDP and significantly fueled our economy's pace of growth.

However, the drawbacks of prolonged working hours are unmistakable. Excessive overtime escalates the workload on employees, jeopardizing their health. Such extended work schedules interrupt their personal and family time, diminishing their overall quality of life. This not only leads to potential familial disputes but also dwindles employee satisfaction. Forced and uncompensated overtime breaches labor laws, infringing upon workers' rights. Given the mixed consequences of overtime, opinions on the matter are varied across sectors. While many vehemently oppose long hours, epitomized by online slogans like "work 996, ICU awaits," others actively seek additional hours. Interestingly, there have been instances where companies took measures to decrease overtime, only to be met with employee protests urging a return to previous schedules.

By December 2022, workers worked an average of 46.7 hours a week, up 0.5 hours from the previous year, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. This means that the average working time of Chinese workers is 9.3 hours per working day, the average overtime hours per week is 6.7 hours, and the overtime hours are rising. Recently, the disadvantages of the "996" work system have aroused widespread concern. "Work 996, get sick in the ICU" has become a grim portrayal of the current situation of overtime work in the Internet industry. The prevalence of overtime work culture in many industries in China is exacerbating the stress on today's young people and increasing the mental health risks faced by the new generation of workers (Liu, 2019). Research on the impacts of overtime work in China has unveiled multifaceted consequences. According to research by Liu and Yang (2018), regular overtime in the tech industry increased reports of physical illnesses like musculoskeletal issues and sleep

disorders. Psychological stressors like burnout and depression also made these conditions worse.

Meanwhile, Zhang (2019) highlighted the societal repercussions, noting a discernible negative relationship between extended working hours and family cohesion, including increased marital strife and weakened parent-child bonds. On the economic front, Wang and Chen (2020) acknowledged the immediate economic advantages of the 996 work schedule. However, they cautioned against the long-term hidden costs, such as heightened employee turnover and potential declines in innovation stemming from worker exhaustion. From a legal standpoint, Li and Zhao (2021) emphasized the rising legal risks for companies adopting unregulated overtime practices, pointing to an uptick in lawsuits and a growing awareness among workers about their rights. Lastly, Shen (2022) charted the shifting public opinion, emphasizing the younger generation's transition from perceiving overtime as an essential economic sacrifice to championing a balanced work-life dynamic, valuing health and well-being.

This study examines the current state of overtime practices within Chinese businesses, investigating the associated challenges and potential remedies. Consequently, companies must identify and adopt suitable strategies to address the issue of extended working hours.

Research Objectives

1. To study the situation of Chinese enterprise overtime working
2. To analyze the problems of Chinese enterprise overtime working
3. To investigate the solutions of Chinese enterprise overtime working

Literature Review

Concept of Overtime Working

Overtime is the hours an employee works that surpass the legal limits or those stipulated in their labor contract. There are two interpretations of overtime: a specific definition and a more general one. In its specific interpretation, overtime is when work is performed on national legal holidays or days off as outlined in the labor agreement. The broader understanding encompasses the specific definition and includes instances when employees work beyond their daily agreed-upon hours (Dehecai, 2023).

As the Labor Law outlines, overtime is typically the time an employer, due to operational and production demands, asks workers to work beyond the stipulated legal hours after consulting with both the labor union and the employees. Typically, this extension is capped at 1 hour daily, though exceptional circumstances can permit up to 3 hours daily, which must be, at most, 36 hours in a month. Furthermore, overtime is based on mutual agreement: employers cannot mandate it, and workers cannot decide to work extra hours unilaterally. Hence, over time, it necessitates at least a formal agreement (Huang, 2013). Due to variations in how rest periods are categorized, there are two primary forms of overtime: one involves

extending the usual workday, either by starting early or ending late, and the other involves working on public or legal holidays. Although "overtime" is not explicitly mentioned in our country's Labor Law, it uses the phrase "extension of working hours." Based on the labor laws' regulations, overtime is identified by three main criteria (Jing, 2023): First, it occurs when employers exceed the legal time frames and infringe upon workers' leisure and rest. Second, it is initiated by the employer's need for extra work, noting that instances where workers voluntarily choose to work extra are not considered in this context. Lastly, the employer must have the employee's or their representative's consent when scheduling overtime.

It is essential to distinguish between "overtime" and the often misconstrued term "duty." Our nation's laws do not specifically define "watch" or "duty." Superficially, both terms refer to employers scheduling workers during working hours, but their core meanings differ significantly. To determine whether a laborer is "on duty" or working "overtime," one can consider three key factors: Firstly, the nature of the laborer's task. Overtime extends one's regular job duties, where workers continue their typical tasks, whereas being on duty often entails taking on different responsibilities outside of one's regular duties. Secondly, the initiation procedures for each vary. Launching into overtime requires the employer to discuss with the union and the workers to gain approval. In contrast, initiating a duty shift does not necessitate such consultations, as such scheduling falls under the employer's internal labor management rights. Lastly, while overtime follows legal time constraints, the duration of duty is at the employer's discretion.

Conceptual Framework

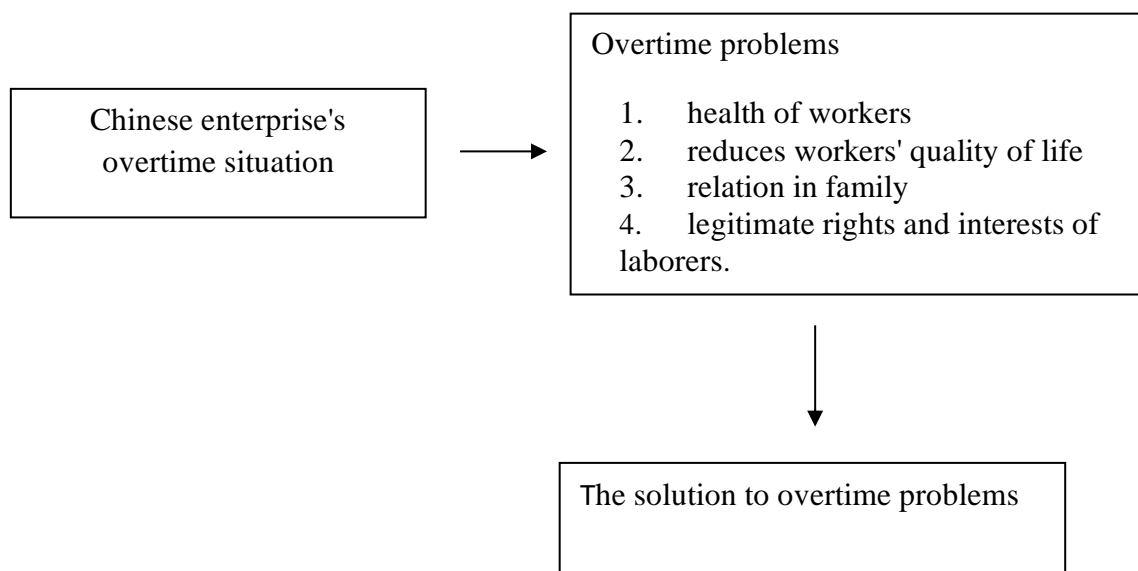


Fig.1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research aims to examine the prevalence of overtime in Chinese businesses, assess the implications of such extended working hours in these firms, and offer policy recommendations to address overtime issues, focusing specifically on three enterprises in Jinan, Shandong Province.

Key Informants

This research employed qualitative methods, utilizing a literature review and comprehensive interviews. The study focused on three companies in Jinan City, Shandong Province, with a total sample size of 15 participants. These companies are Shandong Nagle Software Technology Co., Ltd., Shandong Mino Metal Co., Ltd., and Shandong Yaocheng Luhua Energy Saving Investment Co., Ltd. Shandong Nagle, located in Lixia District, is a renowned firm founded in 2011, known for its innovative transportation solutions and was listed on the "new OTC market" by 2015. Shandong Mino Metal, situated in the same district, was initiated in 2014 and is dedicated to producing and marketing coating products, boasting multiple production facilities since 2005. Lastly, based in Gangcheng District, Shandong Yaocheng Luhua Energy Saving Investment was established in 2011 and emphasizes energy conservation, environmental projects, and related equipment sales. These enterprises, all based in Jinan City, are recognized leaders in their respective domains. This study centered on individuals from three firms in Jinan City, Shandong Province, encompassing company executives, human resource experts, and regular staff, tallying 15 participants. The participants included three top-level leaders, three HR experts, and nine employees. The HR experts boasted over a decade of experience in their field and deeply understood the business. The nine participating employees, who had been with their respective companies for at least one year, expressed eagerness to contribute to the research.

Research Instruments

To meet the goals of this study, the researcher utilizes a qualitative approach, relying on document analysis and structured interviews as the primary data collection tools. The interview format is segmented into three sections, mirroring the study's objectives.

Data Collection

The data collection procedure for this study is outlined as follows:

1. Obtain a research permission form from the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Rajamangala University of Technology Thanyaburi to seek assistance in data gathering.
2. The researcher coordinated and scheduled interviews with corporate executives, HR professionals, and staff members.
3. Using the structured interview form, the researcher interviewed company leaders, HR specialists, and workers.

Data Analysis

Data was evaluated using inductive and content analysis techniques. Post-interviews, audio recordings, and written notes were repeatedly studied and organized into categories based on the research framework. The data underwent a triangulation process to confirm its validity and was subsequently summarized in alignment with the research goals.

Research Results

Objective 1. The prevailing trend of extended working hours in Chinese enterprises was examined. Findings indicated that per the Chinese labor regulations, daily working hours should not surpass 8 hours, totaling 40 hours weekly. Typically, the work schedule runs from 9 am to 5 pm, and any duration beyond these 8 hours is classified as overtime. Working beyond

regular hours is rampant in China, especially in major urban areas and specific sectors. While companies generally set expectations for employees to adhere to standard working hours, job demands and pressures often necessitate overtime. Among the three firms studied, Shandon Nagle Software Technology Co., LTD recorded the highest overtime, averaging between 3-5 hours daily and extending to 5-8 hours during peak times. Shandong Mino Metal Co., Ltd. also frequently resorts to overtime, typically around three hours. In contrast, Shandong Yaocheng Luhua Energy Saving Investment Co., LTD, a government-owned entity, rarely engages in overtime, with exceptions usually lasting around an hour.

“The common problem of overtime work in enterprises is mainly reflected in the frequent overtime work by employees. Many employees must work overtime beyond normal hours to complete tasks and meet job requirements.”

(Yang Gao, Shandong Nagle Software Technology Co., Ltd. June 7, 2023)

“During my time at a trading company, I was constantly pressured to work overtime. There was some overtime almost every week, especially when important orders or projects had tight deadlines. Overtime usually lasts 1-3 hours, sometimes past 9 pm.”

(Dechao Wang, Shandong Mino Metal Co., Ltd. June 11, 2023)

As the economy progresses, market competition intensifies. Rapid product or service launches are crucial for businesses to maintain a competitive edge. This often leads to stringent work schedules and tight deadlines, compelling employees to work extra hours. The time constraints on business tasks mean that employees often need more time to meet professional demands. This is particularly evident in the manufacturing sector, where tight order deadlines might necessitate extended work hours. Furthermore, specific industries experience seasonal or periodic surges, during which increased work hours become essential to cater to heightened consumer demand.

“First, the work of trading companies is often limited by the opening hours of international markets, so employees need to work overtime as needed to meet trading demands. Second, trading firms often face complex contracts and trading terms that require more time to deal with and resolve issues. In addition, the market is highly competitive, and companies may ask employees to work overtime to improve work efficiency and competitiveness.”

(Wang Xinling, Shandong Yaocheng Luhua Energy Saving Investment Co., Ltd. June 11, 2023)

Objective 2. The issue of excessive working hours in Chinese companies has shown that overtime working has the following effects on employees:

1. Workers' Health

Based on the interview data, it is evident that extended working hours are a prevalent issue in Chinese companies, adversely affecting employees' well-being. Continuous overtime results in exhaustion compromised immune systems, and a heightened risk of various health concerns. Issues such as prolonged sitting can cause spinal disorders like lumbar disc herniation. At the same time, the lack of exercise time weakens immunity, making individuals prone to illnesses like colds, fevers, and even depression.

"Long-term excessive overtime will have a certain impact on employees' physical and mental health. Physically, lack of rest and exercise may lead to physical discomfort and illness. Psychologically, working long hours is stressful, and not getting enough rest and recreation can lead to problems such as anxiety and depression, which can also hurt work quality and efficiency."
(Junran Wang, Shandong Mino Metal Co., Ltd. June 11, 2023)

2. Reduce the Quality of Life of Workers

Working overtime places considerable stress on employees, leading to physical and emotional drains and encroaches on their much-needed downtime. This adversely impacts their family life and overall well-being and diminishes their quality of life.

"Working overtime takes time away from family and friends and impacts social life as I often miss appointments and friends have stopped contacting me for a long time."

(Yi Li, Shandong Nagle Software Technology Co., Ltd. June 7, 2023)

"Working overtime prevented me from spending time with my family and friends and affected my family life and social activities. Working overtime for a long time also limits personal interests and hobbies, which cannot be fully developed. I love playing basketball, which I have not done for a long time because of overtime."

(Song Xu, Shandong Mino Metal Co., Ltd. June 11, 2023)

3. Family Relations

Working overtime takes away the precious moments employees should spend with loved ones, relax, and enjoy life, potentially causing rifts between them and their families. Persistence over time can result in emotional detachment within families, possibly leading to marital conflicts and profoundly affecting the individual's familial joy and emotional well-being.

"My children and I have grown apart because of long-term overtime work and neglect of their education and companionship, which makes me sad, but there is nothing I can do about it."

(Xiao Liu, Handong Nagle Software Technology Co., Ltd. June 7, 2023)

"Working overtime interferes with my time with my family and prevents me from fully enjoying my family life. Because my wife and I worked overtime so often, we could only see each other for a few hours a day or not even see each other, which made our relationship increasingly cold and even threatened to divorce. Working overtime also limits my time to pursue my interests and what I think is important."

(Dechao Wang, Shandong Mino Metal Co., Ltd., June 11, 2023)

4. Legal Rights and Interests of Workers

Employees' rights mandate that employers ensure a safe and healthy workspace. The employer is responsible for implementing essential protective measures to mitigate and prevent work-related illnesses and injuries. Excessive overtime work compromises these workers' rights and entitlements.

"In addition, working overtime for a long time has violated my consumer rights and prevented me from enjoying the labor protection given to me by the state."

(Song Xu, Shandong Mino Metal Co., Ltd. June 11, 2023)

Objective 3. Solutions for addressing overtime in Chinese businesses. The findings indicate that the remedies should include:

1. Improve the Vocational and technical System

Enhancing the expertise and skill set of workers in Chinese companies can boost efficiency and output, diminishing the reliance on overtime. Additionally, offering varied training and growth opportunities enables employees to broaden their career horizons, lessening the need for extended working hours.

"If an individual is found to be working overtime frequently, we will communicate with them to understand the reasons for working overtime, provide necessary support and solutions, and conduct regular business training to ensure that employees can effectively deal with work challenges."

(Yang Gao, Shandong Nagle Software Technology Co., Ltd., 7 June 2023)

2. Strengthen Human Resource Management

At the organizational level, company leaders should reduce employee overtime by enhancing production techniques, refining managerial approaches, and innovating human resource strategies. Any overtime resulting from urgent demands should be systematically managed, ensuring employees are granted ample rest post-overtime to rejuvenate. By aligning a labor intensity system with employees and implementing sound performance and salary management, businesses can address the emotional well-being of their workers, striving for a harmonious relationship between management and staff. The goal is to establish a structured operational system for the enterprise that mitigates the effects of unpredictable internal and external pressures, such as rapid business turnovers, unexpected emergencies, inefficient organizational structures, and elevated inter-departmental communication expenses.

"Our company will schedule work tasks and projects more rationally and avoid temporary overtime. Secondly, employees will be encouraged to plan their time properly and provided with training to improve work efficiency. In addition, the company also provides employee care services to help employees relax and relieve stress. Our company also provides overtime compensation in different forms, such as hourly overtime pay. In addition, some companies offer flexible working systems so employees can have a better work-life balance."

(Junran Wang, Shandong Mino Metal Co., Ltd. June 11, 2023)

"We encourage teamwork and the rationality of task allocation, avoiding excessive concentration of work stress on individual employees. We communicate with the team regularly to understand the work progress and our employees' workload. Suppose we find that individuals are frequently working overtime. In that case, we will communicate with them to understand the reasons for the overtime, provide the necessary support and solutions, and conduct regular business training to ensure that employees can effectively deal with the challenges of their work."

(Yang Gao, Shandong Nagle Software Technology Co., Ltd. 7 June 2023)

3. Establish and Improve the Child Care System

Overtime work has become a prevalent issue in today's fast-paced world. A practical solution to mitigate its effects is developing a comprehensive childcare system. Companies could collaborate with local childcare providers or even establish on-site childcare centers to

ensure consistent care and education for their employees' children. By doing this, employees can engage in overtime work without being anxious about their children's welfare. Companies can introduce temporary childcare solutions for unexpected situations, allowing employees to balance professional and personal responsibilities.

Moreover, embracing flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting or varied working hours, can further aid employees in managing their time effectively. On a larger scale, governments can foster this change by implementing policies that incentivize businesses to invest in childcare solutions, like offering tax breaks or subsidies. A robust childcare system is a viable strategy to tackle excessive overtime. Both governmental bodies and corporate entities must invest in and champion the evolution of such systems collaboratively.

"By providing child care services, employees can focus more on work, thereby reducing overtime hours and achieving a balance between family and work."
(Wu Wei, Shandong Yaocheng Luhua Energy Saving Investment Co., Ltd. 12 June 2023)

4. Correctly Safeguarding the Legitimate Rights and Interests of Employees.

To address excessive overtime from a legal and regulatory perspective, business leaders should collaborate with relevant government departments to promote a "leave work on time" initiative, highlighting the importance of work-life balance. There is a need to refine compensation structures, ensuring employees reap the benefits of economic growth. Through strategic legislative measures, it is essential to set clear guidelines that prioritize workers' rights to adequate rest. Enforcing paid leaves and levying penalties for violating employee rights can deter excessive work hours. Establishing a robust social security framework is also vital to provide additional safeguards for workers. Furthermore, a multidisciplinary approach encompassing economic, sociological, and legal insights is essential to understanding and addressing the root causes of prolonged business hours. This holistic strategy will ensure that the adverse effects of excessive overtime on employees are effectively mitigated.

"Company management should attach great importance to employees' work-life balance and formulate flexible work systems and policies so that employees can better balance work and family demands."
(Jingze Ma, Shandong Mino Metal Co., Ltd., 11 June 2023)

Discussions

1. Chinese Enterprises Work Overtime

Overtime work is prevalent in China, notably in metropolitan areas and specific sectors. While organizations often mandate standard working hours, the reality is that many employees extend their workdays to manage the demands and pressures of their roles. This observation aligns with a study by Li and Zhang (2023) that delved into the controversies surrounding corporate social responsibility in the context of the "overtime culture." Their research emphasized that to address the societal concerns arising from extensive overtime, businesses need to adopt a broader perspective on social responsibility, considering not just the economic aspects but also the well-being of their employees. While prolonged intensive work might align with the financial interests of both companies and employees, true corporate responsibility encompasses ensuring its workforce's holistic physical and psychological well-being. Achieving this balance demands collaborative efforts from individuals, businesses, governmental bodies, and society.

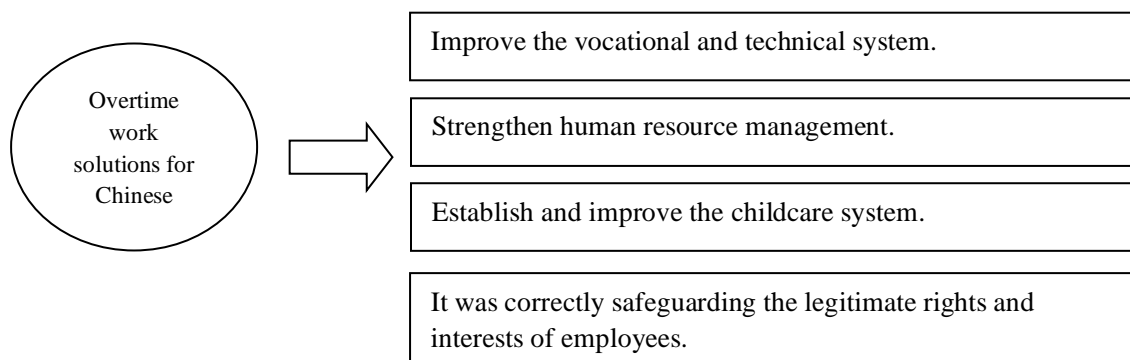
2. The Problem of Overtime Work in Chinese Enterprises

The widespread occurrence of overtime work in Chinese companies is evident from the interviews, and excessive overtime has detrimental effects on employees' health. Consistent overtime leads to physical exhaustion and reduced immune function, making employees more vulnerable to various health issues. This observation aligns with a study by Dembe, Erickson, and Delbos (2005), which explored the repercussions of prolonged work hours and overtime on work-related injuries and illnesses in the U.S. Their findings indicated that the risks associated with extended working hours are not solely due to inherently dangerous jobs or the increased total time spent "at risk" for an injury. To minimize work-related injuries, it is crucial to reassess job schedules, consider job modifications, and implement health protection initiatives, especially for roles that require overtime and extended work hours.

Excessive overtime places significant stress on employees, leading to physical and mental fatigue and encroaching on their time. This can adversely affect their family life and overall quality of life. These observations align with a study by Xue, Li, and Cui (2021), which found that working beyond regular hours negatively impacts contentment professionally and personally. While higher overtime compensation can somewhat offset the decrease in happiness resulting from extended work, the study also revealed that intangible rewards motivate those working overtime more than tangible benefits or time compensation. This underscores the growing emphasis on the importance of non-material incentives in today's work environment.

Knowledge from Research

The solution of overtime work solutions for Chinese enterprises.



Conclusion

Overtime in Chinese businesses, particularly in major cities and specific sectors, is prevalent. While companies often set standard working hours, the real-time demands of various tasks frequently compel employees to work beyond these hours. This could be due to immediate project needs, client demands, or overtime compensation structures. However, in recent times, there has been a push from the government to advocate for more balanced working hours, urging businesses to enhance working conditions and curtail excessive overtime. The challenges posed by extended working hours in Chinese firms include 1) Impact on workers' health, 2) Decline in employees' quality of life, 3) Strain on familial ties, and 4) Infringement on the workers' legitimate rights and benefits. To address these challenges, potential solutions

include 1) Enhancing the vocational and technical training systems, 2) Intensifying the focus on effective human resource management, 3) Developing and refining childcare systems to support working parents, and 4) Ensuring the proper protection of employees' rights and interests.

Suggestions

Based on the results of the study, two suggestions are proposed:

1. Studies in enterprises beyond Shandong Province also indicate issues with excessive overtime.
2. Investigate protocols for implementing policies related to overtime work.

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