

A Controversial Working System in China: The 996 Working Hour System

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Abstract: In recent years, with the progress of the economy and the increase of work competition, a new working system named “996” has appeared in China. It refers to a work schedule of 9 am to 9 pm and six days a week. It has already become a controversial topic in China since it could lead to several problems in many ways. The purpose of this study is to explore how this kind of working system impacts employees. Drawing upon some detailed analysis, the paper mainly focused on the advantages and disadvantages of the 996 system. This study presented a literature review concerning 996 itself as well as related theories, such as Marx's Working day theory and Working Engagement Theory. It concluded that the disadvantages of the 996 system outweigh the advantages. This research can help to raise awareness of the dangers that 996 poses to employees and thus improve their situation in many aspects.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Nowadays, due to the rapid development of the social economy in China, the labor market changes as well. According to China's National Bureau of Statistics, China's Gross Domestic Product has been increased by approximately 6.1% in 2019 [1]. The prosperity of the economy has contributed to the maturation of a trend. This trend is that the types of work in China are no longer limited to the primary and secondary industries. According to network statistics, China adds an average of 30 new types of work each year [2]. However, figure 1 provides that about 47.7% of people work in the tertiary sector throughout the whole country [3]. Specifically, since there are more and more Chinese students majoring on the Internet, the number of practitioners in this industry tends to be saturated, which is the demand and supply of the growing labor market.

The modes of working hours are also divided into free time office and fixed time office. However, Figure 1 provides a visualization that about 14.48% to 24.6% of the employees in China have to accept fixed-time office [4]. The application of this working system is particularly prominent in the Internet industry. Therefore, a controversial working system named 996 working system (996) has emerged in a lot of Internet industries in China's first-tier cities.

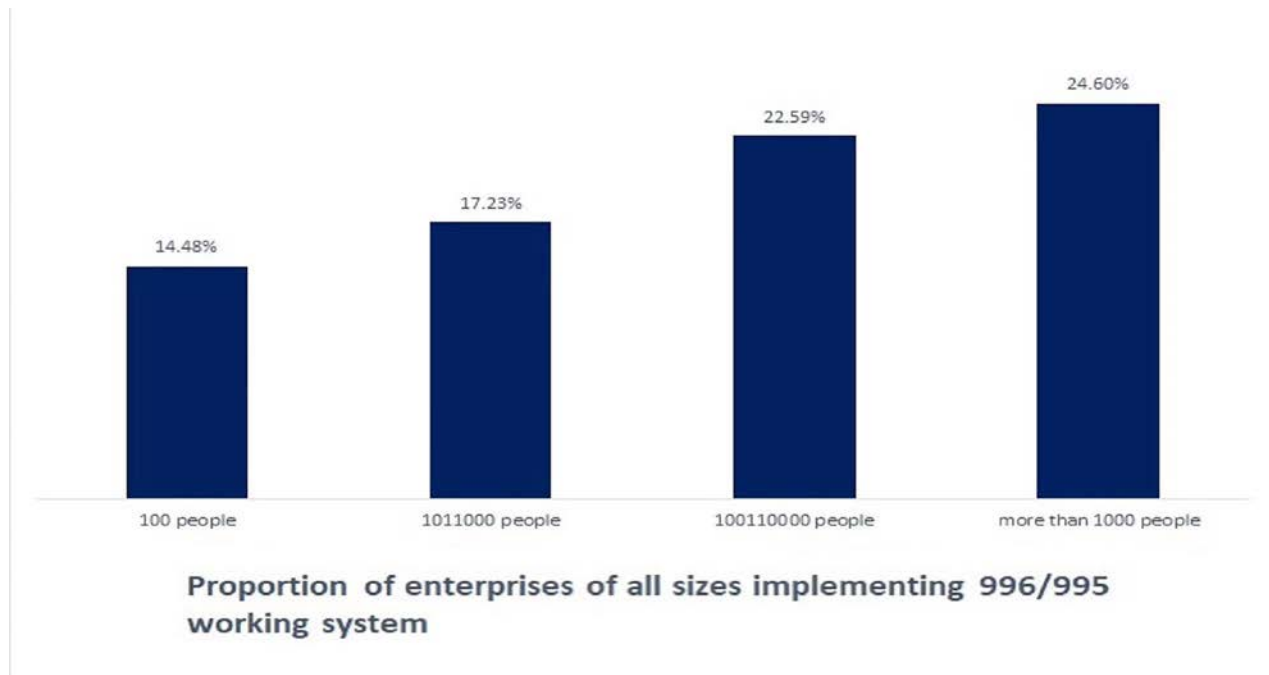


Figure 1. Proportion of enterprises of all size implementing 996/995 working system [5].

This working system means working from nine a.m. to nine p.m. and for six days a week. It belongs to a system with long and fixed working hours, which possibly result in a series of problems in specific aspects. It makes the work cycle of employees longer than in the past. Their rest time has already been reduced to about four days a month while employees usually have weekends in previous time.

996 working system was first put into practice in China in early 2019 and it was followed by several large companies. Therefore, this system was changed from a short working cycle of a state of emergency to a long-term working system. Employees have to accept it due to pressure based on busy work and company policy although they are reluctant. Since this situation led to a series of problems, the Chinese government finally issued policies that clearly stated that the 996 working system violated China's labor laws in August 2021.

Generally, the paper is going to discuss and summarize the impact of the 996 work system on employees who work in the Internet industry in first-tier cities.

1.2 Research Question

In China, with the increase of work pressure and the intensification of workplace competition, many companies increase working hours to deal with these things. However, it will bring many problems. For example, it will have a certain impact on employees' physical and mental health, family life, work enthusiasm, and so on.

According to the previous literature on the relationship between employees' work attitude and working hours, there is an inseparable relationship which means the longer the working hours, the higher the degree of tiredness and the more negative the working attitude. Therefore, the research question of this paper is how the 996 working system changes the life of employees.

Due to Marx's working day theory and working engagement theory, this normalization phenomenon in China is not completely positive. Although the 996 working system can bring more benefits to employers in the short term, it will reduce employees' work desire and work efficiency in the long term. Wen Fan suggested that health behaviors are a product of one's own time and spouses' work time as well as gender expectations [6]. According to Volkoff and Mardon, intense time pressure raises serious problems for most of the employees in their fifties who are exposed to them [7]. Moreover, Álvarez and Henao found that assigning shifts provides the flexibility vital to service sector firms for reducing staff surpluses and shortages and thereby improve staff demand coverage [8]. According to Lehouillier and others, insomnia was related to impair work-related emotional functioning measured at baseline [9]. In addition, Brauner and others suggested that employees with

high working time demands and low control represent risk groups prone to impairments of well-being [10]. However, the initial theory should include a complex interplay of multiple variables involving individual and environmental factors. It did not confirm the postulated effect for the match between state and trait goals on work engagement.

Therefore, the paper can take these results as a breakthrough point for further discussion to learn about the disadvantages of the 996 working system.

1.3 Structure of Paper

The paper assumes that the disadvantages of the 996 working system are greater than its advantages. In order to verify whether our hypothesis is correct, the next research direction of this paper is whether this disadvantage will affect the advantage. The paper will prove that this adverse effect is relatively large and serious through literature and examples.

In the beginning, the paper has a certain discussion on the physical and mental health of employees. After determining the results in this regard, it will explore the long-time work system for employees' work enthusiasm, work attitude, and enthusiasm. Next, based on the above research results, the paper will conduct deeper research in what aspects and to what extent will affect the company and its interests in the long term.

Specifically, it will be divided into salary, work efficiency, work results, physical and mental health, profit acquisition, and so on. The areas discussed in each structure are employees in the Internet industry in China's first-tier cities who implement the 996 work system. In a word, the paper will discuss the various short-term and long-term impacts of the 996 working systems of some Chinese Internet companies on employees in the following contents.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Working Engagement Theory

The concept of engagement emerged in the field of Psychology. And the first serious discussions and analyses of engagement theory emerged in the educational field in the 1990s. While teaching in electronic and distance education environments, Shneiderman, a professor of Computer Science, found that students could engage in learning tasks more efficiently through interaction with others [11]. As for the working engagement, it can be defined as a work-related state of fulfillment that can be characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption [12]. In 1990, Kahn firstly analyzed personal engagement in some psychological conditions [13].

Scholars have pointed out that working engagement has become more and more central these years. A high engagement can make the enterprise more competitive [14]. And the relevant theory can help us build better employee participation and motivated attitudes. To improve the working engagement of employees and to increase productivity, scholars mainly focused on the various factors related to the progress of engagement in their research. Stephens proved that the managers need to include employees in decisions, help them train, and communicate with them innovatively enough to make highly engaged employees [15]. Through analyzing the practical data, Bai and Liu found in 2018 that employee career growth has a positive impact on improving working engagement [16]. Giancola and Frank L in 2012 showed that some employee benefit programs can develop job satisfaction as well as employee attraction, and then improve the working engagement, which people usually ignore [17]. Besides, Huang and others found some other emotional factors such as positive mood proper perceptions of justice and trust relationships through team members can lead to high employee engagement [18-20]. From those results, it can be seen that people-oriented factors have become more and more practical and meaningful nowadays and they can influence working engagement in a way.

From another perspective, the measurement of working engagement has become a heated topic among scholars. The study by McMann and others in 2017 showed that the construct of working engagement measurement can determine the outcomes [21]. However, there is no consensus among scholars as to which measurement method is best to use.

2.2 Marx's Working Day Theory

Marx first put forward the theory of the working day in *Capital's* first volume and defined the contents and boundaries of working days. The working day theory helps to explain why and how the length of working hours changed in different historical periods. Many scholars kept studying Marx's theory and expanded its meanings in contemporary situations.

The length of the workday depends on the struggle between capital class and labor class. The essence of the working hour issue is the class conflict. The capitalists tend to prolong the working day to its maximum length while the workers tend to reduce it to a more normal duration [22]. Therefore, Philp and others in 2005 put forward that class power should be a key consideration [23].

Scholars from various nationalities have tried to apply Marx's theory to explain the reasons for the changes in employees' working hours' overtime. For the external factors, research in Ethiopia pointed out that the absence of strong enforcement mechanisms could cause the illegal working time system [24]. Hang from China also found in 2021 that the work pressure and fierce competition forced employees in developing companies to work overtime [25]. There are also some internal reasons. For instance, Muckenhuber cited a case in Kenya to show that family responsibilities make female employees unable to finish their work during the scheduled time [26].

For the solutions to this issue of the abnormal working day, Bell considered preserving workers' health and safety as the first thing an employer must do [27]. In 2014, Shagvaliyeva and Yazdanifard recommended a flexible working time system that could benefit both employers and employees [28].

Together, there are many reasons for changes in working hours. The core of this problem lies in the fact that employers and employees have conflicting interests. However, research on a working day has to keep up with the times. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the special working time system in specific areas in China nowadays.

3. 996 Phenomenon

3.1 Definition

"996" working hour system referred to as "996", is a work schedule which encourages or forces employees to extend their working hours or even work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week. This is a common phenomenon among Chinese tech companies and startups. It is sometimes used to refer to a series of work systems in which management requires workers to extend their working hours without extra overtime compensation as well.

3.2 Development

Since ancient China, the culture of hard-working has played a significant role in the development of modern China society. Over time working has almost become a workplace culture over 2000 years. Also, some research shows that the 996 working hour system's formation may be affected by the slavery system in ancient China. Modern slavery refers to a variety of situations in which a person is forcibly or subtly controlled by an individual or a group for exploitation [29]. The modern slavery is popular nowadays in China, lots of local producers lower their labor costs to earn more profit, even at the risk of ignoring national labor laws in China, where many low-cost producers operate a "996" working hour system.

From a realistic point of view, the "996" working hour system forms due to some social problems. Firstly, as the rapid development of China needs more labor to finish a larger amount of work every day than before, employees start to work overtime to deal with their tasks. From 2000 to 2010, the proportion of overworked workers in China increased from 20.88% to 26.56% [30]. What's more, with the economic development, the competitive pressure of the industry is also increasing, especially the Internet industry known as the leader of the third industrial revolution. Many companies in the Internet industry must extract benefits from employees in order to maintain the competitive advantage of cost. And some article believes that the distrust and poor communication between senior managers and employees lead to this phenomenon [31].

The overtime culture that is similar to the 996 working hour system has existed in many Asian companies for decades. While the concept of the 996 working hour system was firstly proposed by a Chinese company called Youzan in January 2019. By March 2019, it was reported on social media that some JD business units were forced to 996 and most business units were forced to 995. According to research in 2020, over 80% of the white collars in China always work overtime [32]. Then more and more companies in the Internet industry in China apply the 996 working hour system in their daily work, such as Alibaba, Huawei, and so on.

3.3 Current Situation

Nowadays, there are always two controversial ideas in the social environment of public opinions. On the one hand, lots of CEO of large companies in the Internet industry support the 996 working hour system. Jack Ma said at Alibaba's internal meeting that the 996 working hour system was a "repaired blessing" [33]. Although a document was later issued by Alibaba to clarify that "996" should not be enforced, employees are still required to work overtime in private. Also, Liu Qiangdong from JD claimed that "those who muddle along are not my brothers" [34]. These are ethical kidnapping of employees who maintain normal working hours.

On the other hand, many employees and other people totally disagree with the 996 working hour system. Lots of research and news show that overwork is harmful to employees' health conditions, and it reduces the work efficiency of employees to some degree. One research showed links between working longer hours and adverse health problems. Some of those included strokes and type 2 diabetes for those in lower socioeconomic status groups [35]. A meta-analysis also shows that employees who work long hours have a higher risk of stroke than those working standard hours [36]. Under the high pressure of the 996 working hour system, some employees, unfortunately, got sudden death, which caused an attack of public opinion on the companies. In December 2020, a 23-year-old Pinduoduo employee collapsed and later died while walking home from work past midnight [37].

3.4 Possible solutions

As 996 working hour system is technically prohibited by Chinese law, Chinese government is trying to strengthen supervision and law enforcement to reduce the overwork culture. The Chinese government has revised the labor law of the People's Republic of China and the contract law of the People's Republic of China. There are some employees using public opinion to protect their rights. On March 26, 2019, a well-known code hosting platform for programmers launched a project on GitHub called "996, intensive care units (ICU)", which means "Work 996, Get Sick ICU", to resist the 996 that is prevalent in the Internet industry.

Through these solutions, the atmosphere of the 996 working hour system has been gradually weakened. But it still exists in the culture of many companies in internet industry in China. It is important to analyze the impact of this overwork phenomenon to employees' engagement in workplace.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Results

The 996 working time system has both advantages and disadvantages. For the advantage, most importantly, it can improve the working efficiency to some extent. According to Marx's working day theory, with the 996 system, employees would have longer remaining working hours. Then the surplus value they generate also becomes more. When it is impossible to reduce the necessary labor time of employees, the employers could only obtain absolute surplus value by extending labor time, that is, by requiring employees to work more than eight hours a day. As the company obtains higher profits, it can also provide employees with better office conditions, higher salaries, and benefit programs.

However, in the meantime, the disadvantages of the 996 cannot be ignored. Several studies concerning the theory of engagement reveal a few factors, which could motivate the working engagement of employees. For instance, the positive mood, trust relationships, and the sense of participation in decision making. Under the implication of 996, the employers always work till late

night every day, which leads to the lack of sleep and relaxation. The happy time they use to spend with family and friends is also greatly reduced. There is no doubt that it is not good for their emotions. What's worse, the risk of depression is also increasing. As a result, such negative emotions will decrease the engagement of employees at work and make their work attitudes perfunctory. Besides, working overtime is harmful to building a harmonious relationship with colleagues. The 996 working system makes employees feel that the company regards them as a working machine. As 996 is against the laws of labor in China, they would feel a sense of disrespect when they get exhausted. Also, they cannot get happiness and satisfaction at work at all. Additionally, 996 makes individuals lose their rights to choose or decide. Since 996 is thought to be a regular rule in the company, everyone is supposed to obey this system or they may be considered lazy guys and even be fired in the end. They just couldn't express their actual thoughts freely or directly reject this mode of work. In conclusion, all of the above will decrease the engagement of employees and make them less motivated at work.

4.2 Discussion

To cope with those problems caused by the 996 system, there are a lot of solutions. From the perspective of employees, they should pay attention to their health conditions first. For example, they could exercise more after sitting for a long time. Besides, regular medical checkups are essential. From the perspective of the enterprises, they should listen to the suggestions of the employees more and get to know their actual opinions. The company should also comply with the law of labor and pay wages for overtime working. In addition, more benefits should be given as well as more care for employees. In conclusion, all the company has to do is encourage the engagement and participation of employees. It's a basic principle. Only in this way can the company make profits.

What's more, the government should take responsibility and enact related regulations. First, the government ought to protect the proper rights of the employees. For example, the rights to health and rest. Government should punish those companies which force employees to work overtime in conditions that harm their health.

Second, for those companies which are against the laws, the government can take the initiative to provide some legal services to their employees to support them in defending their rights and rejecting unreasonable regulations at work.

Third, as some people consider that the meaningful working condition is always spending time learning and developing skills, the government could provide some study opportunities for all of the employees to help them improve themselves. In this way, their work efficiency can be improved so that they can complete the required work in less time. It's another method to relieve overtime work.

Then, the government should take action to reduce the pressure on the youth today. Sometimes, employees accept the 996 system just because they want to earn more through working more. High housing prices make people have to work with high intensity at the expense of their health. Therefore, one of the important basic methods for solving the 996 problems is to regulate the price level today.

The experience for solving 996 problems can be used in other fields as well. When coping with some issues concerning labor relations like work injuries, contract disputes, and wage disputes, the managers can follow the basic principle, that is, to respect the rights of the employees and motivate their engagement. Besides, the government always needs to continuously improve the legal system to meet the changing times no matter in which field.

5. Conclusion

This article stands on a background that China's booming economy formed a very representative work system in the context of China's first-tier cities. It then discusses how company employees under the 996 working system have been negatively affected in many ways. The question explored in this paper is what effect the 996 working system has on the employee's physical and mental health and work performance and the corresponding countermeasures. This review refers to the relevant literature on the relationship between work and employment status in recent years and introduces our topic on this theoretical basis. Through data analysis and social phenomenon analysis methods, the paper

discusses the effect of 996 working systems on the staff's physical, psychological, work attitude, and other aspects.

In the end, this paper concludes that as assumed the negative impact of the 996 working system on employees is indeed greater than the advantages. Moreover, the paper gives the possible solutions as well. It is suggested that there should be more laws to protect the rights of employees. In addition, employees who are under such a working system are also supposed to use laws and public opinions to protect themselves.

The research of this paper has played an important role in the future development of China's Internet industry and the protection of the human rights of employees. In addition, this article provides alertness and appropriate advice and planning for some companies in employee distress. Through the discussion of the influence of the 996 work systems on employees, it can guide leaders and enterprises on the management of employees. It can also teach employees how to protect their legal rights. As for the meaning of the paper to future study, this essay offers a significant opinion about changing the unfair working system. It will provide other people who have problems with the 996 working system with some useful suggestions.

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