



Work Engagement and Exhaustion Among Executives: a Narrative Literature Review

Engajamento no Trabalho e Exaustão de Executivos: Uma Revisão Narrativa de Literatura

Compromiso Laboral y Agotamiento de Ejecutivos: Una Revisión Narrativa de la Literatura

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine work engagement processes and executive exhaustion based on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model. A narrative literature review was conducted using the SciELO, Redalyc, BVS-Psi, PsycINFO, PubMed, Medline, and CAPES Journals Portal databases. Four thematic categories emerged from the analysis: repercussions of factors associated with the nature of work; career concerns; work–family conflict; and repercussions of gender differences, with emphasis on women executives. Based on the JD-R Model, a predominance of job demands over resources was identified. Work overload, work–family conflict, and career concerns were described as risk factors for executive burnout, with emotional demands, especially fear of job loss and work–family conflict, standing out as key sources of exhaustion. Regarding job resources, extrinsic aspects were more frequently addressed than intrinsic ones, with a particular emphasis on remuneration practices. This review is expected to contribute to the research and intervention field focused on executives.

Keywords: work engagement, Burnout, executives.

Resumo

Este estudo teve como objetivo conhecer os processos de engajamento no trabalho e a exaustão de executivos a partir do Modelo de Demandas e Recursos Laborais (Modelo JD-R). Para tal, realizou-se uma revisão narrativa de literatura nas bases de dados: SciELO, Redalyc, BVSPsi, Psycinfo, PubMed, Medline, Periódicos CAPES. Do estudo, quatro categorias emergiram da análise: repercussões dos fatores associados à natureza do trabalho, preocupação com a carreira, conflito trabalho-família, repercussões às diferenças de gênero – mulheres executivas. Com base no Modelo JD-R, revelou-se que há predominância de demandas laborais sobre os recursos. As demandas de sobrecarga, conflito-família trabalho, preocupação com a carreira são fatores de risco para esgotamentos dos executivos, prevalecendo demandas emocionais: medo de perder o emprego e o conflito trabalho-família como fonte de risco para o esgotamento. Sobre os recursos laborais, os aspectos extrínsecos foram mais explorados do que os

intrínsecos, tendo sido prevalentes as práticas de remuneração. Espera-se que este estudo possa contribuir com o campo de pesquisas e intervenções voltadas para executivos.

Palavras chave: engajamento, exaustão, executivos.

Resumen

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo conocer los procesos de compromiso laboral y agotamiento de los ejecutivos a partir del Modelo de Demandas y Recursos Laborales (Modelo JD-R). Para ello, se realizó una revisión narrativa de la literatura en las bases de datos: Scielo, Redalyc, BVSPsi, Psycinfo, PubMed, Medline y Periódicos CAPES. Del estudio surgieron cuatro categorías de análisis: repercusiones de los factores asociados a la naturaleza del trabajo, preocupación por la carrera, conflicto trabajo-familia y repercusiones de las diferencias de género – mujeres ejecutivas. Con base en el Modelo JD-R, se reveló que existe una predominancia de las demandas laborales sobre los recursos. Las demandas de sobrecarga, conflicto trabajo-familia y preocupación por la carrera constituyen factores de riesgo para el agotamiento de los ejecutivos, predominando las demandas emocionales: miedo a perder el empleo y el conflicto trabajo-familia como fuente de riesgo para el agotamiento. En cuanto a los recursos laborales, los aspectos extrínsecos fueron más explorados que los intrínsecos, siendo las prácticas de remuneración las más prevalentes. Se espera que este estudio contribuya al campo de las investigaciones y de las intervenciones dirigidas a ejecutivos.

Palabras clave: compromiso, agotamiento, ejecutivos.

In recent years, the study of top executives has become an important line of research in the field of strategic management. Psychology has long been interested in the study of work and workers, and several investigations have also focused on managers in general, including executives. These studies have mainly examined factors related to the nature of work (Dutra & Ceretta, 2020), career concerns (Scanfone, 2006), work–family conflict (Braun et al., 2019), and women in executive roles (Silva & Moura, 2022).

Executives are workers who face high job demands and must manage both intrinsic and extrinsic job resources. They are responsible for strategic decisions that directly affect employees at other hierarchical levels, their jobs, quality of life, and families, with repercussions for the social and economic spheres of the company and its surroundings. A qualitative study, for example, showed that fear of dismissal and the demand to relinquish one's own subjectivity in the name of corporate productivity are recurrent experiences among executives, especially in industrial sectors (Lottermann et al., 2021).

Specific attention to this group is needed because any effects of job demands, whether positive or negative, may have far-reaching implications for the entire organization and its members. Job demands influence the nature of executives' strategic decision-making and leadership behaviors and, consequently, the overall performance of the organization. Focused attention on executives is therefore important, as this perspective can significantly contribute to theoretical advancement and deeper knowledge in the field (Hambrick et al., 2005).

In Brazil, studies grounded in the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model have examined different professional groups, such as members of child and adolescent sexual violence protection networks (Nunes et al., 2019), workers in residential care services for children and adolescents (Almeida, 2019), and information technology professionals at a federal institution (Nascimento, 2018).

The main objective of this study is to understand the factors associated with work engagement and exhaustion among Brazilian executives employed in private companies, based on the theoretical framework of the JD-R Model. Through a narrative literature review, we aim to identify which job demands are most strongly related to professional burnout and which job resources are associated with engagement among these workers. The core proposition is that the balance, or imbalance, between these dimensions directly affects executive performance and, by extension, the strategic decisions of organizations.

This review is limited to studies addressing Brazilian executives working in private companies, with a focus on the relationships between demands and exhaustion, on the one hand, and resources and work engagement, on the other, particularly after the consolidation of the JD-R Model in organizational psychology. The guiding hypothesis is that the intensification of job demands, especially emotional, cognitive, and relational demands, without adequate organizational resources leads to states of exhaustion, whereas access to meaningful resources (social support, autonomy, recognition, and meaning in work) can foster engagement even under high demands. The relevance of this study lies in its contribution to literature by gathering and systematizing empirical and theoretical evidence on the psychosocial processes that shape executives' work, a group often associated with success and privilege, but rarely examined from the perspective of mental health and sustainable work. From a practical standpoint, the findings may support the development of burnout prevention programs and mental health promotion initiatives for top management, as well as encourage critical reflection on leadership roles and working conditions in the contemporary Brazilian organizational context.

Executive work characteristics

Mintzberg (1986) described the roles performed by executives within organizations across three broad groups: i) interpersonal roles (figurehead, leader, liaison), which involve participation in routine duties and ceremonial functions that, although important for organizational functioning, do not directly involve decision-making or the formation of links within the chain of command; ii) informational roles (monitor, disseminator, spokesperson), through which executives access and process information that is critical to the organization; and iii) decisional roles (entrepreneur, resource allocator, negotiator), which encompass organizational improvement, structural or personnel-related, resource allocation, and negotiation. Among these, the resource allocation role, including the allocation of the executive's own time, may be the most essential. Executives must therefore manage their time effectively, prioritizing planning activities rather than devoting it exclusively to external demands.

Executives are primarily responsible for coordinating and overseeing the activities they delegate, which leads them to spend much of their time interacting with people inside and outside their organizations. Most executive communication occurs verbally, even in the presence of frequent interruptions. Executive work is marked by high volume and variety, with fragmented, short-duration tasks. Communication tends to be informal, with verbal and written exchanges as well as routine tasks involving both generalist activities (task analysis and role performance) and specialist activities requiring specific knowledge and skills. Thus, much of the executive's responsibility lies in processing information and formulating strategies (Van Doorn et al., 2022).

Findings from Lottermann et al. (2021) indicate that executives' routines are marked by intense work overload, fragmented activities, and superficial interactions. Many executives do not follow a structured routine and manage several projects simultaneously, requiring constant handling of unforeseen events even under systematic work processes. They often feel constrained by rigid organizational structures that limit the expression of subjectivity and autonomy at work.

Executives face numerous stimuli and operate under substantial pressure to evaluate objectives comprehensively and accurately when making decisions. Their work experience and personal repertoires are therefore fundamental. Traditionally, executives dedicate themselves intensely to work and operate in highly dynamic environments characterized by speed, long working hours, overload, and demand for immediate results (Blettner et al., 2023).

Despite existing research, primarily from the field of management, the activity of Brazilian executives remains insufficiently explored (Barreto et al., 2021; Pacheco et al., 2019). Furthermore, the executive level has received limited attention in the literature based on positive psychology and the JD-R Model (Geibel et al., 2022).

Positive psychology and the JD-R Model

Positive psychology emerged to rebalance the focus of psychology by ensuring that healthy aspects of human functioning also receive attention. It does not ignore human suffering or the importance of studying mental and behavioral pathology. Instead, it aims to complement psychological inquiry by highlighting positive and healthy aspects of development, emphasizing prevention over treatment. Positive psychology therefore studies the factors that promote optimal functioning, with applications in clinical, educational, and organizational contexts (Gaffaney & Donaldson, 2025).

The JD-R Model originates from positive psychology applied to work and addresses aspects related to work engagement and exhaustion. Since its early formulations (2001–2010) and its subsequent developments (2011–2016), the JD-R Model has evolved considerably (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023).

According to the JD-R Model, job characteristics fall into two broad categories: job demands and job resources (Magrone et al., 2024). Job demands are physical, social, or organizational aspects of work that require physical and/or psychological effort (cognitive or emotional) and are therefore associated with physiological and psychological costs. They represent work characteristics that may generate strain when they exceed an employee's adaptive capacity. Job resources, on the other hand, are physical, social, or organizational aspects that can be extrinsic (e.g., autonomy, social support, supervisory training, feedback, development opportunities, credibility, rewards) or intrinsic (e.g., self-efficacy, meaning in work, intrinsic motivation, health). Job resources i) facilitate goal achievement; ii) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs; and iii) stimulate personal growth and development (DeHaan et al., 2024).

A key JD-R assumption is that job demands and job resources elicit two distinct psychological processes: exhaustion and engagement. High job demands that require continuous effort may deplete workers' resources, leading to energy loss and health problems. Specific demands such as workload or emotional strain have repeatedly been shown to predict exhaustion across several occupational groups (Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2021). Conversely, a lack of demands may reduce learning opportunities, diminish previously acquired skills, decrease motivation, and create monotony at work (Hladot & Harvankova, 2024).

Job resources help employees cope with demands due to their intrinsic and extrinsic motivational potential. As workers use these resources to meet their goals, they may become more engaged in their work. In general, demands and resources tend to be negatively related: high demands, such as pressure and emotionally taxing interactions, may

hinder the mobilization of personal resources, whereas high resource availability, such as social support and feedback, can reduce job demands (Capozza et al., 2023). This dynamic combination activates self-regulation mechanisms that help workers replenish the energy spent during tasks (Vazquez et al., 2019).

The JD-R Model also proposes that job resources can buffer the impact of job demands on workers' health. Under highly demanding conditions, employees with substantial resources are better equipped to cope and therefore experience lower exhaustion (DeHaan et al., 2024). Job resources are also strong predictors of work engagement (Hakanen et al., 2024). They may function as motivational factors by activating behaviors that promote healthy energy recovery. The emphasis lies in strengthening protective factors that buffer harm and amplify those that foster well-being and engagement (Vazquez & Hutz, 2021).

Work engagement refers to the investment of personal energy (physical, cognitive, and emotional) into work tasks (Kahn, 1990). According to Bakker and Demerouti (2017), who popularized the construct, engagement is characterized by three components: vigor (high levels of energy), dedication (deep involvement accompanied by a sense of meaning, enthusiasm, and challenge), and absorption (high concentration and immersion, with time passing quickly) (Caldas et al., 2013).

Within the JD-R framework, highly engaged workers mobilize more psychological capital (e.g., optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, hope) and more job resources (e.g., autonomy, social support, career opportunities) (Caldas et al., 2013; Demerouti et al., 2001). Research shows that engagement and exhaustion are independent yet negatively related states (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Mintzberg's (1986) executive roles align closely with the processes of engagement and exhaustion described in the JD-R Model. Interpersonal roles may lead to emotional strain when not accompanied by resources such as social support, recognition, or a positive organizational climate. Conversely, when relational resources are present, such as team cohesion and autonomy, these interpersonal roles can promote engagement by reinforcing dedication and meaning at work. Informational roles constitute cognitive demands that, when excessive, increase the risk of exhaustion and early burnout symptoms (Maslach et al., 2001). However, resources such as feedback, decision-support technologies, and protected time for strategic analysis may transform informational roles into opportunities for growth, enhancing vigor and absorption (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Decisional roles involve high levels of responsibility and pressure for results, which may deplete emotional and cognitive resources and lead to exhaustion (Vazquez et al., 2019). Yet, when executives have access to decision-making autonomy, value alignment, and organizational recognition, these same roles can foster strong engagement and intrinsic motivation (Hakanen et al., 2024).

Thus, Mintzberg's (1986) roles are not neutral from an occupational health perspective: depending on the interaction between demands and resources, they may constitute either risks for exhaustion or opportunities for engagement. Positive psychology, with its emphasis on healthy and protective aspects of work, provides a framework for understanding how executives can mobilize internal resources (e.g., hope, resilience, self-efficacy) and external resources (e.g., team support, feedback, autonomy) to balance these demands. The JD-R perspective therefore enables deeper insight into how the accumulation of roles and demands may lead to burnout, while strengthening resources can promote well-being and sustainable performance.

Applying the JD-R Model to the executive context helps explain how accumulated demands, such as workload, critical decision-making, structural rigidity, and constant exposure to risk, can lead to emotional exhaustion, while resources such as autonomy, recognition, and value alignment foster engagement (Capozza et al., 2023; Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2021). Emotional exhaustion is characterized by feeling overwhelmed and depleted of physical and emotional resources, leaving insufficient energy to meet work demands (Maslach et al., 2001). In positive psychology, exhaustion is the first of four components of burnout, followed by emotional dysregulation, cognitive decline, and mental distancing. Additional symptoms may include depressed mood, psychological distress, and psychosomatic manifestations (Vazquez et al., 2019). Among these dimensions, this article emphasizes exhaustion, generally recognized as the earliest and most sensitive indicator of burnout and directly linked to overload (Maslach et al., 2001).

Based on this conceptual foundation, the present article aims to understand engagement and exhaustion processes in the work of Brazilian executives through the lens of the JD-R Model, which offers a robust theoretical contribution to the study of engagement (Vazquez & Hutz, 2018). By applying this framework to executives, the study seeks to support the development of practices that promote the well-being of these professionals at both individual and collective levels within organizational settings.

Method

Study design

This study is a narrative literature review whose purpose was to gather, systematize, and critically analyze existing studies on work engagement and exhaustion among Brazilian executives, using the JD-R Model as the theoretical framework. Narrative reviews allow an interpretive and flexible approach aimed at understanding meanings, recurrences, and gaps in academic discourse on a given topic (Koller et al., 2014). Content analysis was used as the

data analysis method, enabling examination, selection, and interpretation of the material in order to extract relevant information from the documents identified.

In order to apply this methodology, several stages were followed: definition of the research objective; identification of the corpus; definition of analytic categories; establishment of inclusion and exclusion criteria; document retrieval; initial reading and pre-analysis of the texts; systematic analysis of the material; and validation and presentation of the results (Bardin, 1977).

Data collection and analysis procedures

The search strategy was guided by descriptors aligned with the study objective, selecting terms that clearly expressed the main axes of analysis: “engagement,” “exhaustion,” “job satisfaction,” and “job demands–resources model,” combined with the terms “executives” and “managers.” The decision to include both “executives” and “managers” was intended to broaden the scope of the search, acknowledging that many studies use these labels interchangeably in organizational contexts. The inclusion of “job satisfaction” complemented the primary descriptors and allowed the retrieval of studies addressing subjective dimensions related to engagement and exhaustion, even when these constructs were not explicitly named.

Descriptors were defined in Portuguese, English, and Spanish. In order to encompass national, international, and Latin American literature, this strategy broadened the scope of the review and minimized linguistic bias, ensuring the inclusion of relevant publications from different cultural contexts.

Database selection sought to cover both national and Latin American production and the international literature. SciELO, Redalyc, and BVS-Psi were chosen for their importance in indexing scientific journals in Portuguese and Spanish, thus capturing Ibero-American output. PsycINFO was included as the main international database in psychology. PubMed and Medline were incorporated because they concentrate studies at the interface of health, work, and occupational stress. The CAPES Journals Portal provided integrated access to periodicals from multiple fields, thereby increasing the breadth of the search.

The time frame was set from 1986 to 2020. This historical cutoff includes the publication of Mintzberg’s classic work (1986), which strongly influenced research on executive work, and extends to the period in which the JD-R Model became consolidated. Inclusion criteria were i) texts published in peer-reviewed journals or recognized academic repositories; ii) texts available in Portuguese, English, or Spanish; and iii) texts that explicitly addressed the topics described in the study objectives. Exclusion criteria were i) texts without full-text access; ii) duplicate articles across databases; and iii) publications focusing on public-sector executives or political officeholders, whose occupational profiles differ substantially from those in private business settings.

Initial screening used the “floating reading” technique (Franco, 2008), which makes it possible to grasp the overall meaning of the texts and identify their main arguments, foci, and perspectives. Based on this stage, four thematic categories were organized, derived from recurrent content in the selected material and aligned with the theoretical axes of the study (executive work, engagement, exhaustion, JD-R).

The categories were constructed inductively from the content of the articles, while remaining anchored in core concepts from work psychology. Each is described below.

The category “Repercussions of factors associated with the nature of work” grouped texts that addressed the characteristics and specificities of executive work. These included intense workload, tight deadlines, pressure for results, and lack of autonomy in decision-making. Analysis of these studies helped elucidate how such factors shape executives’ daily work and contribute to physical and mental exhaustion.

The category “Career concerns” comprised texts exploring engagement at work and career progression. The focus included the pursuit of recognition and promotions, feelings of insecurity, and the perceived need to acquire new skills and knowledge. These studies offered insight into how career concerns can foster engagement while simultaneously increasing susceptibility to exhaustion due to the pressures and expectations associated with professional advancement.

The category “Work–family conflict” gathered studies examining the interface between professional demands and family responsibilities. These texts analyzed how excessive work demands interfere with balance between work and personal life, giving rise to tension and stress.

The category “Repercussions of gender differences – women executives” grouped texts that focused on the implications of work for women in executive positions. These studies addressed challenges such as unequal opportunities, the need to juggle multiple roles, and structural barriers, enabling a more in-depth understanding of how gender differences shape executive work experiences.

Results and Discussion

In literature, most studies focus on male executives, reflecting the higher proportion of men in these positions. Both theoretical and empirical investigations were identified, with the empirical studies employing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed designs. There is a predominance of empirical research, using diverse methodologies. No Brazilian studies were found that directly apply the JD-R Model to executives.

The findings are presented below in four categories: i) Repercussions of factors associated with the nature of work; ii) Career concerns; iii) Work–family conflict; and (4) Repercussions of gender differences – women executives, as summarized in Table 1. In addition, this article proposes a systematization of the main job demands and job resources discussed in literature, organized according to the JD-R Model.

Table 1.

Synthesis of job demands and job resources among executives, by analytic category, in light of the JD-R Model

Category	Main demands/ resources	Key studies	Convergences	Divergences
Nature of work	Work overload, long working hours, colonization of personal time, physical symptoms associated with overactivity	Scanfone (2006); Lima et al. (2012); Tanure et al. (2014); Oltramari et al. (2011); Sierdovski et al. (2024)	Consensus on excessive working hours and invasion of personal time; stress linked to time management	Different emphases: time and stress (Tanure) vs. physical symptoms (Oltramari); absence of studies on intrinsic resources (resilience, self-care)
Career insecurity	Promotion, status, remuneration, employability, fear of unemployment, aging	Tanure et al. (2007); Oltramari et al. (2011); Lottermann et al. (2021); Dutra & Ceretta (2020)	Career as central to identity and status; remuneration as a reinforcement of engagement	Generational differences: younger executives focus on employability, senior executives on deceleration; critical gap regarding ethics and inequality in bonus schemes
Work–family conflict	Long working hours, paternal absence, family pressure, normative expectations regarding lifestyle	Tanure (2002); Oltramari et al. (2011); Tanure et al. (2014); Braun et al. (2019); Sedaroglu (2021)	Predominance of work time over family life; suffering among spouses and children; generalized dissatisfaction	Differences in the family's role: critical vs. normative; gap in organizational support policies; lack of longitudinal post-pandemic studies
Gender differences – women executives	Gender prejudice, masculinization of behaviors, “glass ceiling,” motherhood dilemmas, domestic overload, need for support networks	Santos et al. (2014); Silva et al. (2023); Carvalho et al. (2010); Barros (2019); Moraes (2014); Carneiro et al. (2021); Ayatakshi-Endow & Steele (2021)	Consensus on structural barriers (prejudice, motherhood, domestic workload); individual coping strategies (masculinization, outsourcing of care)	Scarcity of effective institutional policies; limited intersectional analyses (race, class, region); predominance of individual over collective solutions

Repercussions of factors associated with the nature of work

Factors associated with the nature of work are inherent to the context of the tasks performed by workers. Two stand out: i) overload, understood as the extent to which employees face demands that exceed their work capacity, and ii) degree of control, which refers to the autonomy or freedom they have at work, especially in planning and decision-making about tasks, with direct repercussions for their perception of time (Ferreira et al., 2015).

Executives differ in how they deal with the impacts of change in the current business environment. Some feel compelled to build wealth and sustain increasingly high standards of living, becoming “prisoners” of this lifestyle, whereas others intentionally plan to slow down. This pattern emerged in a study of young and senior executives in Brazil, focusing on the three highest hierarchical levels in large corporations — presidents, vice presidents and/or directors, and managers positioned immediately below the second tier (Lima et al., 2012).

Lima et al. (2012) surveyed 10 large companies from different economic sectors, with 959 respondents in the quantitative phase and 263 in the qualitative phase. Regarding job demands, their findings depict an intensive career in which both young and senior executives face challenges involving employability, tensions arising from the reconciliation of professional and personal life, and reduced opportunities for career progression due to leaner organizational structures. Added to this are insecurity about their own competencies and generational conflicts stemming from clashes of values between age groups. Many executives describe the need to build assets and sustain a high standard of living. Some report the responsibility of being the sole family provider, whereas others experience pressure to be more present in their children's daily routines, facing the dilemma of reconciling parenthood with demanding work schedules.

Other aspects of executive work related to overload and perceptions of time include short-term demands, rigid punctuality requirements, work-related travel, and extended working hours. On the surface, executives appear to have greater control over their schedules than other employees; however, they often feel captive to an ecosystem shaped

by internal and external pressures, postponing personal and affective demands in favor of business imperatives (Tanure et al., 2014).

Scanfone (2006) examined Brazilian executives' perceptions of work and nonwork time and its impact on different life domains in a study of 965 executives (presidents, vice presidents/directors, and third-level managers) from 344 large companies. Most were men, generally married or in long-term partnerships and with children. Working hours were long, with more than half also working on weekends. Travel time, business lunches and dinners, corporate events, and time spent answering emails or handling work-related matters were not formally counted as part of the workday. The study also revealed widespread dissatisfaction with time management between personal and professional life, with work time predominating over nonwork time and long working hours being the norm.

In another study on executives' perceptions of time and its relationship with stress, Tanure et al. (2014) found that stress among executives is directly linked to time management. Symptoms of stress were more frequent among those working ≥ 12 hours per day compared with those working 8–9 hours. There was also a statistically significant difference in job satisfaction between these groups, with those working fewer hours reporting higher satisfaction. The authors highlight that stress has aptly been described as “the disease of time” (Tanure et al., 2014).

Total orientation toward work may generate symptoms of “hyperactivity.” This was observed by Oltramari et al. (2011), who documented a logic of intense acceleration and dedication to work among executives. As consequences of this hyperactivity, executives reported symptoms such as labyrinthitis, vertigo, dermatological problems, physical fatigue, and exhaustion, along with an awareness that they should take better care of their health. However, lack of time frequently overshadowed such concerns. Even when they sought medical care, many reported being unable to continue treatment because of time constraints.

More recently, a study of 106,711 employees from companies listed among the “100 Incredible Places to Work in Brazil” showed that, even in contexts considered healthy, the main perceived sources of stress were performance pressure (14.97%), self-criticism (13.22%), and workload (13.18%). Time management and the need for closer relationships with leadership emerged as key factors in reducing stress. The authors argued that technology and innovation must be allies in promoting sustainable work environments, but that human factors remain central to maintaining productive and healthy teams (Sierdovski et al., 2024).

Overall, the studies converge in identifying overload, time management, and an accelerated pace as central demands permeating executives' lives. While research such as that of Tanure et al. (2014) emphasizes the relationship between time and stress, other studies, such as Oltramari et al. (2011), highlight physical symptoms associated with hyperactivity, indicating different emphases around the same problem. Generational differences also emerge: younger executives tend to project their careers around upward mobility and consumption, whereas senior executives more often express a desire to slow down (Lima et al., 2012). Despite consistent evidence on the negative effects of overload, there remains a gap regarding intrinsic resources, such as resilience, self-efficacy, and self-care strategies, that could act as mediators in this process.

Career insecurity

Career-related concerns are highly salient in executives' lives, encompassing both upward mobility and the challenge of reconciling career, family, and time devoted to work. Time invested in work is perceived as essential for earning recognition and potential promotion, as is time dedicated to remaining up-to-date through courses and readings to maintain one's current position and envision future growth. These elements cannot be analyzed in isolation; rather, they intertwine and shape the executive's broader life context. Notably, studies show that only a minority of executives reach the second tier (23%), and very few (4%) attain the top tier of the organizational hierarchy (Tanure et al., 2007).

Career dilemmas revolve around time, mobility, professional success, status, and consumption. These tensions permeate executives' professional trajectories and reverberate in family relationships as distress, even when families align themselves with executives' work patterns to preserve their current lifestyle (Oltramari et al., 2011).

In this context, the “good professional” is portrayed as constantly available, agile, and flexible. Concerns about aging are frequent, as older age is associated with obsolescence and reduced productivity. Career advancement often pushes personal and family life into the background. Families interviewed in Oltramari et al. (2011) reported the father's and husband's absence, along with a resigned understanding that “it could not have been otherwise.” At the same time, access to financial rewards and benefits contributes to wealth accumulation, which in turn brings recognition and respect from colleagues and clients.

Executives also report a constant need to stay up-to-date, which tends to compromise sleep. They describe the “threat of incompetence,” the specter of uselessness, and the fear of not keeping pace with accelerating demands, failing to remain “useful products.” As a result, they feel compelled to pursue continuous development to meet current job requirements and prepare for a possible second career (Oltramari et al., 2011).

Parallel to concerns about remaining in employment, there are anxieties surrounding retirement, second careers, and identifying the “right moment” to stop. For some executives, the decision to slow down arises when effort is no longer adequately rewarded, when status becomes less central, and when their criteria for career success shift over time (Oltramari et al., 2011).

For younger executives, concerns about competencies are especially salient. Their desire for growth is intense and expected to occur rapidly, which can generate misalignment between their personal goals and organizational expectations, captured in the adage “let it be infinite while it lasts.” Young executives frame their trajectory under the banner of employability, navigating uncertainty, mergers, and acquisitions. This environment heightens the perceived need to acquire a set of market-recognized competencies, such as a strong résumé, to secure long-term employability (Tanure et al., 2007).

In terms of employability, fear of dismissal associated with unmet targets and market volatility is prominent. Senior managers also experience the “ghosts” of unemployment. Organizational tenure no longer guarantees stability. Feelings of insecurity increase in the face of economic and market instability, fear of failing to meet performance goals, and concerns about not fulfilling organizational expectations (Lottermann et al., 2021).

Remuneration is a particularly relevant issue for executives, as it sustains their level of consumption and contributes to the social status of both the individual and the family. In their study on the impact of prestige, performance, corporate governance, and CEO experience, Dutra and Ceretta (2020) note that executive compensation has become a central topic in the corporate arena in recent years, especially in the aftermath of major corporate scandals.

Executive compensation typically includes a base salary, annual performance-based bonuses, stock options, long-term incentive plans, and benefits such as health and dental insurance and private pension schemes. Except for fixed salary and benefits, most elements are explicitly tied to company performance, such that executives receive substantial rewards when business results are positive and shareholders earn high returns on invested capital. Multiple indicators and targets are used to structure these schemes, and increases in executive compensation are directly linked to career progression, higher hierarchical positions are associated with more robust compensation packages (Dutra & Ceretta, 2020).

Competition, large bonuses, awards, and benefit policies reinforce a vicious cycle that keeps executives bound to ever-higher levels of performance and exemplary behavior at work, as well as to public recognition expressed through trophies, medals, photographs, and other nonfinancial forms of status reinforcement.

In the career domain, findings suggest that status, advancement, and remuneration function as demands that sustain engagement but simultaneously heighten vulnerability to exhaustion. Younger executives are focused on employability and accelerating achievements (Tanure et al., 2007), whereas senior executives increasingly consider deceleration or transition to a second career (Oltamari et al., 2011). This generational gap indicates that career dilemmas are not linear but shaped by time and age. At the same time, although the literature recognizes the role of remuneration as a driver of engagement (Dutra & Ceretta, 2020), it seldom addresses the ethics and inequalities underlying multimillion-dollar bonus schemes in contexts marked by instability and unemployment (Lottermann et al., 2021). The predominance of an individual perspective over an organizational one also emerges as a gap, as studies tend to emphasize executives' personal choices without questioning the structural conditions that shape and constrain those choices.

Work–family conflict

Imbalance in work demands can lead to work–family conflict, in which family life is compromised by work. It is common for executives' work to extend into weekends and interfere with family interactions. Business travel is often combined with family activities; some executives bring spouses and children to fairs and events because they see them so rarely. As a result, family interaction becomes sporadic, and work-related dynamics frequently permeate family relationships. According to Braun et al. (2019), work–family conflict may influence executives' intentions to leave their jobs.

In a Brazilian study with 626 executives from large companies, Tanure (2002) examined satisfaction with quality of life and found that approximately 66% of respondents were dissatisfied. One of the main sources of dissatisfaction was time management, particularly the balance between personal and professional life and time devoted to family and spouse. The executives reported spending 71% of their time on work, working an average of 11 hours per day and regularly working on weekends.

A study on career-related personal dilemmas among bank executives and their repercussions on family life identified significant impacts in this domain (Oltamari et al., 2011). Spouses and children reported dissatisfaction, frequently citing lack of time for family, work invading the domestic sphere, and difficulty maintaining family routines. Spouses described emotional distance and lack of dialogue, while many children reported feelings of abandonment. Regarding dedication to children, Tanure et al. (2014) found that executives themselves were dissatisfied. Families exert strong pressure for greater presence, which can even trigger doubts about continuing in the career. Executives reported a sense of irretrievable lost time and distress over not having witnessed their children's development. At the same time, when some executives expressed a desire to leave their jobs, many families believed they should continue. In these cases, the family is perceived as a normalizing force that not only supports survival but also helps maintain a lifestyle (Oltamari et al., 2011).

A later global study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that job insecurity, long working hours, and work pressures are significant predictors of work–family conflict, particularly among people working from home

(Sedaroglu, 2021). These findings underscore the ongoing relevance of the topic, even with changes in work design. Executives remain dissatisfied with the time dedicated to their children and experience strong family pressure for greater presence.

Evidence indicates that work–family conflict is one of the main sources of dissatisfaction among executives, characterized by long working hours, invasion of domestic space, and feelings of abandonment reported by spouses and children (Oltamari et al., 2011; Tanure et al., 2014). Studies converge in showing that time devoted to work outweighs time devoted to family, but diverge regarding the family's role: in some contexts it appears as a critical voice demanding greater presence; in others it functions as a normalizing agent that legitimizes paternal absence to preserve lifestyle. More recent research conducted during the pandemic (Sedaroglu, 2021) reinforces the persistence—and in some cases intensification—of this conflict even under home-office conditions. There is still a lack of studies that examine institutional policies designed to support work–family reconciliation, which reinforces the tendency to place responsibility solely on the individual for managing this balance.

Repercussions of gender differences – women executives

The participation of women in executive roles has increased, but they remain a minority. In addition to facing the same challenges experienced by male executives, women encounter specific dilemmas, such as gender prejudice, expressed in the constant need to prove competence, resist being reduced to “sexual objects,” and deal with pay disparities compared with men in similar roles; pressures related to motherhood, including social expectations to become mothers and the tension between the “biological clock” and career advancement; difficulty securing reliable support networks for domestic tasks and childcare; and dilemmas in reconciling career progression with affective and romantic relationships, both in terms of time devoted to one's personal life and the degree of partner support for professional growth.

A qualitative study with 47 Brazilian women who reached the top three levels of management in large and medium-sized companies revealed experiences of “subtle” prejudice. The executives reported feeling scrutinized and judged in the same way as men, yet needing to work harder to prove they could handle challenges while also managing responsibilities outside the organization (Santos et al., 2014). Silva et al. (2023), studying engineering students in Pernambuco, found that perceptions of female underrepresentation are present from early training. Gender stereotypes shape how these students envision their careers, restricting access to leadership positions in male-dominated fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Beyond prejudice, differences between men and women in organizations are also shaped by gender roles. Women are expected to adopt behaviors similar to men and adapt to workplace demands according to organizational culture in order to attain higher positions. This adaptation involves clothing that departs from historically feminine stereotypes of fragility and delicacy and moves toward a more “neutral” and austere style modeled on masculine norms. Women are also expected to display firmness in speech, gait, and decision-making (Carvalho et al., 2010). This adaptation is described in several studies as a coping strategy against the “glass ceiling,” which imposes implicit barriers to women's advancement. In a recent study with 62 Brazilian women managers, strategies such as continuous qualification, family education, and performance-based legitimacy were identified as mechanisms for challenging this “glass ceiling” (Carneiro et al., 2021).

These expectations often result in a form of “masculinization” as a coping strategy. Some women relinquish docility; others change their speech to a “more assertive” style. One manager, for example, reported enrolling in martial arts classes to strengthen her body language and tone of voice in order to meet the behavioral expectations associated with her role (Barros, 2019).

Pressures related to the biological clock and the challenges of motherhood are also highly salient in women executives' daily lives (Carvalho et al., 2010). Overlapping professional and maternal demands hinder career progression. Many women report concern that the early years of career advancement coincide with the most biologically favorable period for childbearing, forcing a difficult choice between combining both projects (pregnancy and career advancement) or sacrificing one for the other. After children are born, long working hours compound the difficulty of reconciling childcare with professional responsibilities. Ayatakshi-Endow and Steele (2021), interviewing women entrepreneurs in Rio de Janeiro during the COVID-19 pandemic, showed that even outside the traditional corporate sector, women needed to activate informal family support networks to balance domestic and professional demands, revealing resilience and creativity in adverse contexts. Career mobility for women executives also tends to be lower because of their greater involvement in childcare, which limits advancement to higher-level positions.

The need for a support network to manage domestic routines and childcare is a recurring challenge. Whereas male executives often rely on spouses as additional resources for handling domestic tasks, women executives usually manage these activities themselves, and only a minority share them equally with partners. Domestic routines are frequently outsourced to housekeepers, nannies, drivers, or grandparents. Even so, many women experience substantial overload and exhaustion, cutting back on sleep, rest, and leisure to meet both work and domestic demands while feeling guilt and indebtedness for not fulfilling what they believe is expected of them.

In a study of women managers in the Manaus industrial hub, Moraes (2014) identified several challenges: difficulty reconciling domestic tasks and work; lack of family support for professional responsibilities; and pressures related to children's education. Participants reported overload due to factors associated with the nature of work, such as excessive demands and tight deadlines, multiple tasks, high performance pressure, complex assignments, interpersonal difficulties, and emotionally demanding interactions, all of which intensified tension.

In another study with 263 Brazilian women executives from 344 companies, Carvalho et al. (2010) concluded that, despite facing numerous challenges, these women continue to juggle multiple roles while also striving to meet societal standards of beauty and health, engaging in physical activity, personal grooming, and other self-care practices, alongside efforts to maintain a satisfactory marital relationship. Although they expressed dissatisfaction with the time available for work and rest, they reported liking what they do and choosing to remain in their careers. In general, they would not abandon their professional trajectory to devote more time to family, despite ongoing doubts and reflections.

From an institutional standpoint, advances in gender equity depend on structured organizational actions. Recommended practices include standardized promotion criteria, professional development programs with a gender focus, leadership training, and initiatives to raise awareness of the benefits of diversity in management, including equal pay (Carneiro et al., 2021; Goryunova & Madsen, 2024).

Overall, the literature shows that women executives, in addition to experiencing the same demands as their male peers, face specific dilemmas related to gender prejudice, motherhood, and domestic overload. Studies such as Santos et al. (2014) and Silva et al. (2023) highlight persistent subtle biases and underrepresentation, whereas Carvalho et al. (2010) and Barros (2019) describe individual adaptation strategies, including behavioral masculinization, to break through the "glass ceiling." Motherhood emerges as a central dilemma, shaped by the "biological clock" and the difficulty of reconciling caregiving with long working hours (Ayatakshi-Endow & Steele, 2021). Although organizational practices aiming at equity have been proposed (Carneiro et al., 2021; Goryunova & Madsen, 2024), they remain incipient in the Brazilian context, and individual solutions, especially outsourcing domestic work, predominate. Literature converges in identifying structural barriers but diverges regarding coping strategies, indicating that changes have relied more on women's efforts than on institutional transformation.

Integration of the studies with the JD-R Model

This study aimed to examine engagement and exhaustion processes among executives based on a narrative literature review. Because no prior studies were found explicitly articulating the JD-R Model with executive work, the present analysis represents an effort to establish these connections.

Regarding job demands, findings indicate that demands outweigh job resources for executives. Hambrick et al. (2005) define job demands as the extent to which a given executive experiences work as difficult or challenging. They argue that executives face specific demands that require attention, as neglect may result in major strategic errors, pressure on the entire organization, a misleading perception that "everything is fine," or unsatisfactory performance.

Within the JD-R framework, the main job demands identified for executives in this review include: high volume of stimuli; increasing pressure for performance and results (cost reduction and profit growth); strategic decision-making; vulnerability to dismissal; rapid change in the business environment; accelerated technological dynamics; intensification of competitive dynamics; shorter product life cycles; increased geopolitical integration; long working hours; work overload; frequent interruptions; unpredictable demands; and lack of autonomy over time management (Dutra & Ceretta, 2020; Lima et al., 2012). More recently, Zhu et al. (2022) showed that high executive demands reduce exploratory innovation, highlighting the negative cognitive effects of overloaded environments.

Numerous emotional demands also emerge as pervasive "ghosts" in executives' lives: tensions arising from difficulties in reconciling work and family (time for children, time for spouse); extension of working hours (time spent on emails, messaging apps, and calls outside regular hours; business lunches, dinners, trips, and events); sleep problems; doubts about career ("Is it worth it?"); material dilemmas ("Do my children prefer more present parents rather than so much money?"); ageism (perceived obsolescence associated with aging); instability; fear of unemployment and difficulties in re-entering the labor market, including the possibility of accepting lower salaries; insecurity (about competence, economic conditions, and competition from younger professionals); the need to build assets and support increasingly high standards of living; fear of losing the lifestyle provided to the family; heavy sense of responsibility; and high levels of stress (Oltremari et al., 2011; Santos et al., 2014; Tanure et al., 2014). These emotional demands contribute to executives' exhaustion and directly influence their level of engagement.

Work overload and work-family conflict emerge as key risk factors for executive burnout. For women, additional burdens include gender prejudice, pressures related to the "biological clock," overload from childcare combined with long working hours (feelings of guilt toward children, logistical management of household staff, children's schedules and routines), and difficulties in romantic relationships. Emotional demands are consistently reported as risk factors for exhaustion, encompassing fears of job loss, loss of recognition, decline in lifestyle, perceived uselessness, and other concerns.

Job resources, which are physical, social, or organizational aspects of work that are functional for goal attainment and help reduce job demands and their physiological and psychological costs (Bakker et al., 2007), were less frequently

mentioned in the studies, with an emphasis on extrinsic resources available in the environment. A multidimensional study showed that personal resources such as optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy mediate the impact of engaging leadership on work engagement, underscoring the importance of integrating these resources into the JD-R framework (Mazzetti & Schaufeli, 2022).

Remuneration-related aspects (benefits, bonuses, stock options) appear as major influences on engagement and as moderators of exhaustion among executives (Dutra & Ceretta, 2020). Executives receive substantial incentives, in some cases stock-based, which represented 8%–58% of average CEO pay in 1990 and increased to 58% in 1998. These gains depend on rising share prices, creating a “win–win” relationship for shareholders and executives. Such mechanisms are common in top-management compensation structures (Dutra & Ceretta, 2020).

Among job resources, extrinsic resources are cited more often than intrinsic ones. The main extrinsic resources identified for executives include: substantial incentives for high performance (short-term bonuses, profit sharing); stock grants or stock options (long-term incentives); aggressive benefit packages (company car, life insurance, high-quality health and dental plans for family members, private pension schemes); award programs and campaigns (trips, special campaigns); informational, emotional, and instrumental support at work (prestige, recognition, and professional respect expressed in internal media coverage, intranet features, and access to top leadership); and autonomy and trust.

Intrinsic job resources, those located within the individual rather than the environment, were less frequently discussed. Reported examples include repertoire, skill variety, and prior experience. Only one specific study focused on personal resources. Bakker et al. (2007) examined three personal resources (self-efficacy, organization-based self-esteem, and optimism) and hypothesized that: i) personal resources moderate the relationship between job demands and exhaustion; ii) they mediate the relationship between job resources and engagement; and iii) they influence how employees perceive their work environment and well-being. The results showed that personal resources did not buffer the relationship between job demands and job resources and exhaustion. Instead, they mediated the relationship between job resources and engagement/exhaustion and influenced the perception of job resources. Intrinsic resources may therefore benefit organizations by enabling employees to respond to adverse situations with greater optimism, persistence, and adaptability (Bakker et al., 2007).

Overall, the reviewed literature reveals broad convergence among authors regarding key aspects of executives' lives. Job demands significantly exceed job resources. Faced with high demands, executives often become deeply involved with work. This involvement may be healthy (engagement) or pathological, as in work addiction (workaholism or work addiction [WA]) (Braun et al., 2019). In crisis contexts, executives who apply self-regulation strategies, such as self-monitoring and daily goal setting, can mitigate exhaustion even under intense pressure (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023).

Among job resources, extrinsic resources prevail over intrinsic ones. With regard to gender, although women's participation in the labor market is growing, women executives remain a minority. No studies were found that address intrinsic personal resources, upward motivational spirals of vigor, or personal accomplishment applied directly to executives.

Conclusion

Because of the articulations presented and the absence of previous studies linking the JD-R Model to executives' work context, this review is expected to contribute to the field and to intervention strategies targeting this specific group.

Limitations identified here point to avenues for future research. There is considerable scope for quantitative investigations examining factors associated with engagement and exhaustion among executives; identification of engagement and exhaustion clusters and their relationships with demands and resources; analysis of the moderating role of intrinsic and extrinsic job resources; and tests of the mediating role of intrinsic resources in the relationships between demands, resources, and exhaustion.

There is also substantial potential for qualitative studies that deepen understanding of executives' experiences of engagement and exhaustion at work, based on the meanings they themselves attribute to their trajectories and daily lives.

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