

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Changing overwork culture: Stakeholder management for employee wellbeing and social sustainability in large Japanese companies

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Abstract

Effectively addressing overwork culture in business remains a challenge, despite growing concerns about its negative impacts on employee wellbeing and productivity. This paper investigates corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and stakeholder management promoted by large Japanese companies to address overwork culture. Based on interviews with managers and stakeholders from 31 companies, the study reveals that despite being part of CSR, overwork reduction initiatives often come into conflict with entrenched institutional pressures. These pressures are embedded in a cultural-cognitive and institutional context that prioritises quality and cooperation over individual productivity. We argue that improving stakeholder relationships is vital for developing a healthy and productive workstyle and for reactivating institutional dynamics that are fundamental to employee wellbeing, productivity and broader social sustainability. By clarifying the role and processes of stakeholder management, this paper contributes to the discourse on overwork and CSR, offering new insights into how to effectively address overwork culture.

KEYWORDS

corporate social responsibility, employee wellbeing, institutional factors, overwork, social sustainability, stakeholder management

1 | INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing concern about overwork practices in the workplace (Angrave & Charwood, 2015; Lufkin, 2021) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) for employee wellbeing (Celma et al., 2014; Greenwood & Freeman, 2011; Sorribes et al., 2021). Employee wellbeing refers to the fulfilment of the physical, mental, social, and cognitive needs and expectations of workers related to work (Danna & Griffin, 1999; ISO, 2021). The poor quality of working life, in particular overwork culture at workplace, is increasingly scrutinised globally for its negative impacts on employee health,

wellbeing, and productivity (OECD, 2018a) as well as on social sustainability (Conigliaro, 2021). CSR scholarship has emphasised the ethical responsibility of companies and potentially positive business outcomes to consider employees' needs and expectations as stakeholders (Dembe, 2009; Kobayashi et al., 2018). However, research is lacking particularly with respect to integrating stakeholder management to challenge the entrenched culture of overwork (Brieger et al., 2020; Cooke et al., 2020; Mariappanadar & Aust, 2017). This gap underscores the need for research into CSR initiatives and stakeholder management that specifically address overwork.

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Recent developments in CSR point to the need to take into account the competing historical institutional and cultural factors in order to enhance social sustainability outcomes (e.g., Braga et al., 2021; Diaz-Carrion et al., 2018). In particular, in Japan and other Asian cultures such as South Korea and China, overwork has become 'normal' and to a degree 'taken-for-granted' within the historical institutional, cultural and competitive context (Kang et al., 2017; Tatliyer & Gur, 2022). Overwork is a social responsibility issue because an organisation's primary ethical obligation to its employees is to provide a good working environment, including not harming employees' health and wellbeing (Kaptein, 2008). Therefore, in this paper, we draw from a combination of institutional and stakeholder perspectives to explore the role of companies and their stakeholders in addressing historical institutional and cultural factors that lead to overwork culture. Specifically, we address the following research question: how do companies promote CSR and stakeholder management to change overwork culture?

Japan provides a valuable empirical context in this regard. Japan is known for its work culture that values the hard work, and 'overwork culture' has become normalised (Kanai, 2009). CSR initiatives and strategies are also increasingly adopted by large Japanese businesses within a web of relationships that differs from the Western workplace (Kobayashi et al., 2018; Todeschini, 2011). Hence, we can look at how CSR initiatives are promoted to address the overwork culture. The data for this paper were gathered prior to the COVID19 pandemic. The pandemic nevertheless brought into focus the importance of wellbeing, and overwork culture continued to be a societal concern during the pandemic (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare [Japan], 2021). A critical examination of how companies strive to re-normalise a healthier and more productive workstyle, especially when local context has historically nurtured overwork culture, presents a promising opportunity for advancing CSR and stakeholder management scholarship beyond institutional and cultural limitations.

Building on prior CSR research on employee wellbeing (Macassa et al., 2020) and ethical issues of overwork (Dembe, 2009), our study advances the discourse by examining the integration of stakeholder management into CSR initiatives within large Japanese companies to address the deeply rooted culture of overwork—a perspective that has been underrepresented in social sustainability research (Braga et al., 2021). We present empirical evidence and a process diagram, illustrating how these companies navigate the intricate interplay of CSR initiatives with institutional and cultural challenges to transform established work practices and norms. This paper not only evidences the effectiveness of CSR and stakeholder management in changing normalised patterns of overwork but also augments the literature by offering actionable insights for organisations aiming to address overwork through stakeholder management—a focus previously neglected in research on overwork (Dembe, 2009; Golden, 2009; Mariappanadar & Aust, 2017). Our findings provide a more nuanced perspective, addressing limitations previously noted in CSR initiatives for employee wellbeing (Kobayashi et al., 2018) and highlighting the critical role of stakeholders (Macassa et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2014).

We contend that effective stakeholder management is essential to reap benefits employees, companies and society, thereby addressing a significant gap in the literature. This underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach that embraces the joint responsibilities of companies and stakeholders (Miller et al., 2014) in tackling the culture of overwork and promoting social sustainability. This approach recognises that the norm of overwork, entrenched in institutional and cultural contexts, extends beyond individual and organisational boundaries and involves a broader network of stakeholders (Braga et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2017). Further, our study clarifies the dynamics between internal and external stakeholders that perpetuate overwork culture, indicating the need for substantial shifts in 'normal' work behaviour (Dembe, 2009; Verbeke & Tung, 2013). Consequently, we argue for the view that overwork should be re-envisioned as a product of dynamic stakeholder relationships (Mainardes et al., 2011), which are being actively renegotiated around a revitalised organisational goal of sustainability, wellbeing and productivity (Miller et al., 2014).

This paper is structured as follows. We first review research on overwork, CSR and the empirical context of large Japanese companies. We then present the theoretical framework and methodology adopted for this study. This is then followed by findings, in which interview data are presented based on the theoretical framework. We conclude with discussion and conclusion.

2 | RESEARCH ON OVERWORK AND CSR

2.1 | The modern challenges of overwork

Overwork refers to the state where workers work longer than 50 h a week (OECD, 2018a). After the industrial revolution, a growing concern for workers' health led to the labour movement in Europe, which eventually led to the regulation of work hours. In 1919, the ILO Convention established daily (8 h) and weekly (48 h) working hours, followed by the Weekly Rest Convention in 1921 (Golden, 2009). Since then, a series of policies and regulations have been formulated to reduce working hours in developed countries (Lu & Chou, 2017).

However, the regulations and monitoring of working hours are becoming more challenging with the advent of a 24/7 society, advances in communication technology, and the blurring of the lines between work and home (Rönkä et al., 2018). While the exact working hours remain difficult to measure across countries, 11% of the OECD workforce is estimated to work over 50 h per week, which is more prevalent in Japan, South Korea, and other Asian countries. It is less common in the USA and Europe (OECD, 2018a).

The working hours may be influenced by cultural and social factors. A cross-country empirical analysis shows that, within the individualist-collectivist dimension, individualism is negatively associated with working hours across countries (Tatliyer & Gur, 2022). Tatliyer and Gur (2022) argue that employees work longer hours in collectivist societies, where company is prioritised over family and self, while in individualist societies, the opposite is true. Accordingly,

overwork may be harder to address in societies that are more collective, despite increased public scrutiny. Overwork is increasingly associated with adverse health conditions such as fatigue, exhaustion, and burnout, which then leads to low productivity and performance (Angrave & Charwood, 2015; Bartoll & Ramos, 2020). Furthermore, the impact of overwork extends beyond individuals and organisations to social sustainability (Conigliaro, 2021).

2.2 | Overwork in Japan: Cultural expectations

In Japan, overwork is considered one of the reasons for declining demographics since it discourages young people from starting families (OECD, 2011). Given the low birth rates in Japan, the workforce is estimated to shrink rapidly, by 25% between 2015 and 2050 (OECD, 2018b). Post-WWII, work culture in Japan has been shaped by lifetime employment. Lifetime employment is an 'implicit guarantee of long-term employment', whereby employees benefit from long-term job security and are expected to 'take advantage of ways to exert discretionary effort' for the company (Kato & Kodama, 2018, p. 8). While this employment approach had some advantages, such as an employment guarantee and resulting loyalty, it also had some drawbacks in terms of work culture. Full-time employees in this system are expected to accept the company's choice of workstyle, including content, location and working hours (Tsutsui, 2015). If employees did not accept the company's directive, they were viewed as disloyal employees, and their careers as core employees were seriously restricted (Tsutsui, 2015). Article 36 of Japan's Labour Standards Act (enacted in 1947 and amended in 1995) accommodated overtime work as it stipulates that 'in case of a written agreement' with a company union, the employer can 'extend the working hours' beyond 40 h per week (The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, 2016). Under the assumption of lifetime employment and associated regulations, companies, their union and employees have accommodated overwork (The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, 2016).

2.3 | Government and corporate responses to overwork

However, large Japanese companies have found themselves increasingly under scrutiny globally in two ways. First, economic pressure has come from the global market. Overwork is considered one of the causes of stagnant labour productivity and economic competitiveness in Japan (OECD, 2018c). In 2018, Japan's labour productivity (gross domestic product per hour worked) was the lowest among the G7 countries, lagging behind its competitors (OECD, 2018c). Second, normative pressure has come from the application of global CSR and corporate sustainability standards (i.e., U.N. Declaration of Human Rights, ILO conventions, U.N. Global compacts, SRI ratings and Global Reporting Initiatives), which call for upholding the ethical principles of labour practice and employee wellbeing, such as fair wages (including

working hours and overtime), better work-life balance, flexible working hours and job security (European Commission, 2001).

Over the past two decades, the average annual working hours for Japanese companies have hovered around 2000 h, and only about half of the paid annual leave is taken by employees, and almost a quarter of companies surveyed in Japan have full-time employees working over 60 h a week (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare [Japan], 2016). According to the Better Life Index, Japan ranked 35th out of 40 countries in terms of work-life balance, with an emphasis on the long work hours of full-time employees (OECD, 2018a). The Japanese government adopted the Action Plan for Realising Workstyle Reform, declaring its determination to improve work-life balance and productivity of the workforce to revitalise Japan's economy (Council for the Realization of Work Style Reform [Japan], 2017). In 2018, the Japanese government passed the Workstyle Reform Act, which sets an upper limit on overtime work (45 h per month and 360 h per year) with penalties for companies that violate these limits (Takami, 2019). Thus, regulating excessive overwork and improving employee wellbeing and productivity has emerged as an important CSR agenda among large Japanese companies. Although many large Japanese companies have introduced overtime restrictions and other work-life balance measures, they find implementation more challenging than expected due to emerging conflicts (Kobayashi et al., 2018).

3 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 | Institutional theory: Understanding institutional influence on overwork

Our starting point for considering the CSR initiatives on overwork comes from institutional theory, which maintains that organisational practices are influenced by the institutional environments, which are composed of various institutional factors within each country (Amor-Esteban et al., 2019; Scott, 2014). As organisational practices, human resource management (HRM) operations gain meaning and stability from a combination of institutional factors (Braga et al., 2021; Diaz-Carrion et al., 2018; Wilcox, 2012). The persistence of overwork practices suggests that institutional factors continue to contribute significantly to overwork as a recurrent HRM issue. As Braga et al. (2021, p. 71) suggested, 'scripts about how to hire, fire, manage performance, develop and promote people' are influenced by a mix of regulative, normative and cultural factors. Regulative factors consist of laws and regulations that exert coercive pressure on companies to comply with the rules, significantly influencing CSR at the country level (Amor-Esteban et al., 2018). Normative factors encompass societal and organisational obligations and expectations that enforce adherence to what is deemed appropriate, thereby shaping societal culture (Carrasco et al., 2015). Additionally, cognitive-cultural factors represent the culturally-supported shared beliefs that place mimetic pressure on doing what is expected within the cultural context (Braga et al., 2021).

However, institutional theory also suggests that institutional factors can change over time. There may be actors who seek to maintain the existing factors, but others may work to realign them and create new factors; consequently, it is possible to conceptualise constant change in employment and labour practices in the emergence of new institutional fields and logics (Greenwood et al., 2002; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). In the context of this study, the regulative elements include the changing government regulations on working hours. The normative elements include changes in the requirements and expectations from business associations and certification bodies to monitor and reduce working hours. Cultural elements involve changes in shared beliefs about workstyle. Overwork persists despite mounting pressures for Japanese employers to reform their workstyles as part of their social responsibility. Thus, we examined how companies promote CSR initiatives to reduce overwork.

3.2 | Stakeholder theory: Managing relationships regarding workstyle

We also draw on stakeholder theory, which states that organisations are systems of relationships with stakeholders that affect or are affected by their operations, and organisations need to consider the interests and needs of stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2010; Vos, 2003). Managing for stakeholders involves simultaneously creating values for multiple stakeholders and even society as a whole (Serrano-Cinca et al., 2021). In this study, we were primarily interested in how companies identify key stakeholders, such as employees, unions, and customers, and interpret their needs and interests, and construct relationships regarding workstyle to benefit stakeholders and society as a whole. Stakeholder management includes three perspectives: normative, instrumental and descriptive. The normative perspective allows us to analyse the ethical basis for promoting overwork reduction initiatives for stakeholders; the descriptive perspective allows for an analysis of how to work with stakeholders; the instrumental perspective allows for an analysis of business benefits for the company (Mishra & Suar, 2010). In this study, we focused on practical management solutions that help companies fulfil the ethical principles (e.g., the employee rights to health) and instrumental benefits (e.g., the productivity and performance improvement), while working with stakeholders (Lähteenmäki & Laiho, 2011). Thus, we examined how companies can shift away from overwork practice and a traditional overwork norm by promoting stakeholder management.

3.3 | Modelling the relationship between overwork and CSR initiatives

Jointly applying institutional theory and stakeholder management allows us to examine the roles of stakeholder management within a changing institutional context. The companies and their stakeholders exist within a dynamic institutional environment, including markets and society (Brammer et al., 2012). As such, stakeholder pressure and institutional pressure are interrelated, as stakeholders can draw legitimacy from institutional pressures, and institutional pressures are often actualised through stakeholder mechanisms (Lee, 2011). Considering these perspectives, the following process diagram, which is drawn from the theoretical framework, illustrates the relationship between overwork, CSR initiatives and stakeholder management within companies (see Figure 1).

The component ‘Overwork’ represents the initial condition within companies, specifically in large Japanese companies, where overwork is prevalent. It is a condition that needs to be addressed due to its negative impact on employee wellbeing and overall business performance. The component ‘CSR for employee wellbeing’ indicates the responses of companies to the issue of overwork, where CSR initiatives are promoted with the goal of improving the employee wellbeing. These initiatives are part of the companies’ ethical responsibility to their employees and aim to address overwork. The arrow linking these two components is labelled ‘Influenced by Institutional Factors’, signifying that overwork is not an isolated phenomenon but is influenced by broader institutional factors. This may include established employment practices such as lifetime employment, which can institutionalise the expectation of long working hours. The text ‘limited outcome’ suggests that CSR initiatives lead to a limited outcome. The arrow labelled as ‘Affected by Stakeholders’ signifies the critical role stakeholders play in shaping the CSR initiatives that aim to address overwork within companies. The component ‘Stakeholder Management’ indicates the process by which the companies engage with various stakeholders, such as employees, unions and customers, to manage and influence the institutional factors effectively. This stakeholder management is essential for the success of CSR initiatives and for promoting change in work culture. Using this process model, we investigated how companies perceive and respond to changing institutional and stakeholder pressures, promote CSR initiatives and manage emerging conflicts through stakeholder management to reduce overwork.

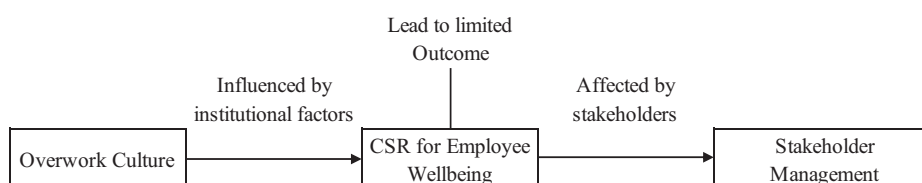


FIGURE 1 Process diagram drawn from theoretical framework.

4 | METHODOLOGY

4.1 | Exploratory approach and sample selection

Given the scarcity of empirical research, this study adopts an exploratory approach (Robson & McCartan, 2016) and situates itself within a social constructionist paradigm (Bryman & Bell, 2015). CSR initiatives are examined through the perspectives of managers and stakeholders, who act and, based on their experience, form interpretations that shape social reality (Schwandt, 1994) and define the realities of management practices (Fineman, 1997). Qualitative research interviews offer flexibility and openness when gathering and analysing the perspectives of companies and stakeholders (Kelemen & Rumens, 2008). Accordingly, this study chose qualitative interviewing as a research method to hear their voices and develop themes and concepts (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The sample companies for this exploratory study were selected using purposive sampling (Bryman, 2016) from large Japanese companies. In Japan, most listed companies belong to business leadership organisations committed to CSR, such as Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) and Keizai Doyukai (Japan Association of Corporate Executives), and the websites and reports of these large companies often emphasise their CSR policies and initiatives, including the importance of ethics for a healthy and productive work environment. Therefore, this study examines the translation of CSR commitments into concrete initiatives and outcomes.

4.2 | Data collection and criteria

We applied the following inclusion criteria to examine CSR initiatives by large Japanese companies to change overwork culture: high CSR and corporate sustainability ranking and evaluation in major indices (e.g., The Dow Jones Sustainability Japan 40, Nikkei NICES ranking), participation in health and productivity-related initiatives (e.g., Japan Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) & Tokyo Stock Exchange 'Health and Productivity Management Selection 2016', Nikkei B.P. 'Health and Productivity Management Forum'), and having more than 5000 employees with headquarters in Japan (categorised as 'large firms' by the Japanese government). The choice of large Japanese firms with a high ranking for CSR ensured that companies had developed fairly sophisticated CSR initiatives and strategies (Bondy et al., 2012). Applying these criteria, we selected an initial pool of 120 companies known for their sophisticated CSR history, strategies and practices.

We gathered the contact information from the websites of these companies and sent an interview request to the CSR departments of the companies. In the request, we asked the company to select appropriate interviewees from CSR, HR or other departments. The company also choose the main interviewee, as employee wellbeing and productivity issues are traditionally dealt with in HR and, more recently, in the realm of company-wide workstyle reform initiatives. In this manner, we aimed to capture a corporate perspective that accommodates both CSR

and HR perspectives (Mun & Jung, 2018). In addition, snowball sampling was used to identify and interview stakeholders and informants for triangulation of data and interviews with corporate managers.

4.3 | Data analysis

This process resulted in 31 companies with sophisticated CSR practices as well as stakeholders who are knowledgeable about the research topic (see Appendix A for the participants list). In October 2016, we conducted semi-structured interviews in Japan either face-to-face or online, lasting 60–90 min each. Participants discussed their views and experiences on pressures, actions and conflicts related to CSR for workforce wellbeing, including overwork (see Appendix B for the interview guide). Interview data were then transcribed, and thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 11 (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We employed abductive reasoning to analyse the data (Kovács & Spens, 2005), which combines a deductive and inductive thematic coding, to re-contextualise individual phenomena (CSR initiative on overwork and stakeholder management) within a contextual framework (institutional factors), as illustrated in Figure 2.

Abductive reasoning aims to develop new combinations of established theoretical models and new concepts derived from the encounter with the new reality (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 559). Accordingly, prior to analysing the data, nine codes relevant to the theoretical framework were derived from the literature, which informed the development of research and interview questions. The interview data gathered were then analysed through an inductive coding process, encompassing three stages: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the first step of open coding, the researcher reads the transcripts carefully, identifying the main ideas in the text, resulting in 20 first-order codes (e.g. tracking overtime hours, work virtue/expectation and customer's demands). In the second stage of axial coding, the researcher reviewed all the codes concerning the research question, identifying their commonalities and relationships. During this process, similar codes were merged and renamed into seven second-order codes (e.g., control and monitor working hours, internal conflicts and external conflicts). During the third step of selective coding, the researcher reviewed all the codes again concerning the research question, interpreting new empirical data to extend the framework. This process resulted in three major themes (e.g., overwork reduction as a CSR initiative) with various sub-themes. These themes are reported in the findings below.

5 | FINDINGS

We present findings under three themes: (1) overwork reduction as a CSR initiative, (2) institutional conflicts on workstyle and (3) stakeholder relationships for a healthy and productive workstyle. The findings provide a picture of overwork culture as a normalised workstyle actualised by existing web of stakeholder relationships within the Japanese institutional and cultural environment. Furthermore,

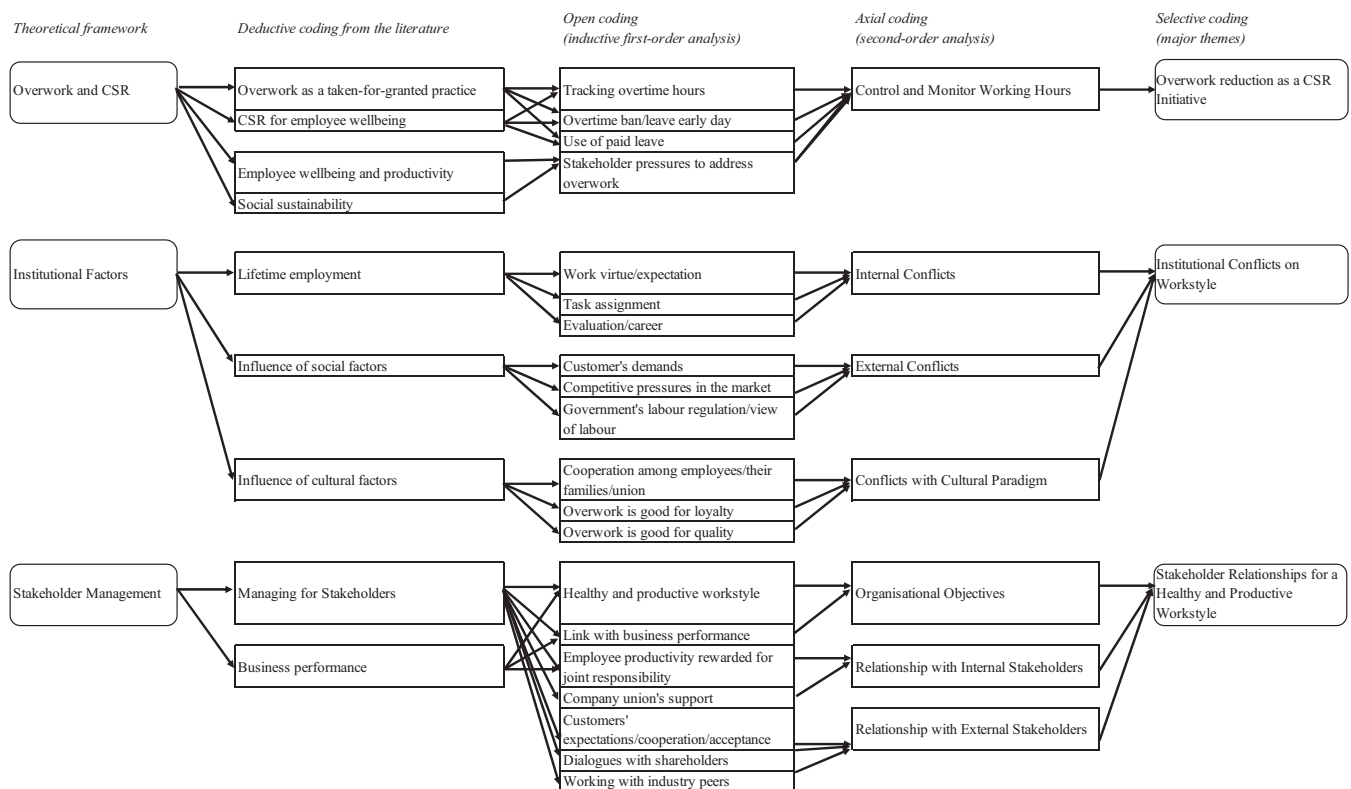


FIGURE 2 Coding process and themes. CSR, corporate social responsibility.

the findings show that some companies are working towards breaking away from an overwork culture by reconstructing the stakeholder relationships to achieve better outcomes in employee wellbeing and productivity.

5.1 | Overwork reduction as a CSR initiative

All participants acknowledged increasing pressures from the stakeholders, such as the government and the market, to reduce overwork and claimed that their companies have adopted relevant CSR initiatives to control and monitor working hours (see Table 1 for initiatives and key performance indicators).

However, while participants seemed confident that they were implementing these initiatives, many participants (21 of 31) were much less confident about outcomes. Participants expressed concerns:

If we shorten working hours, output will fall by just as much. We understand that overwork is an issue, but sales may decrease if we reduce hours... Even if the company says, 'go home early', we think, 'Who is going to do this work?' (Z-Senior Manager)

This concern was shared by L-Manager, who argued that 'the work keeps piling up' unless the company prioritises the work. A central aspect of their concerns was not knowing how to improve

TABLE 1 Examples of overwork reduction initiatives.

Company (industry)	Initiative	Key Performance Indicator (KPI)
P (Transportation)	Encourage employees to come to and leave work earlier Establish twice-weekly 'go-home-early' days Track late-night and weekend work	-
J (Heavy industry)	Overtime ban day once a week Encourage use of annual paid vacation	Total annual work hours Annual overtime hours Paid vacation use rate
R (Electronics)	Reduce 'over 80 h of monthly overtime'	Number of person
X (Housing construction)	Encourage use of paid leave	Number of days/person/year Paid leave use rate

productivity and business outcomes, while reducing overwork. Many participants (21 of 31) felt that overwork reduction was not well integrated into business strategy.

How do you go about achieving a work-life balance? What does it have to do with the business? If there is no link between work-life balance and the business, then these initiatives will just not gain ground (Q-Manager).

Although overwork reduction initiatives are integrated into CSR, they continue to be decoupled from business strategies and outcomes in our sample companies. These findings indicate that simply enforcing working hours reductions due to social responsibility is not enough to effect change in workstyle and improve employee wellbeing and productivity.

5.2 | Institutional conflicts on workstyle

Table 2 summarises how CSR initiatives aimed at reducing overwork conflict with institutional pressures from relevant stakeholders concerning workstyle.

Most participants (23 of 31) reported that their employees often continued to be influenced by inherited work virtues that cause them to overwork. As Stakeholder A stated, 'Japanese employees emphasise "doing one's utmost" given a task. This virtue may easily lead to the taken-for-granted expectation for working overtime'.

There is a sense and a feeling of wanting to show one's boss that one has done their utmost. It would be good if the boss could clarify what is enough, but this is quite difficult (J-Executive Officer).

The participants indicated that they tend to work overtime because it is considered a virtue and they think their managers expect it. Moreover, there was also concern that forcing overwork reduction could lead to employees choosing to overwork even more.

We monitor working hours... If computers have been logged on after business hours and there is unpaid overtime, there will be severe consequences if the

TABLE 2 Institutional pressures, stakeholders, and conflicts with overwork reduction initiatives: number of mentions and key concerns.

Institutional pressure	Key stakeholders relevant to the institutional pressure	Conflicts with overwork reduction initiatives	Number of mentions	Key concerns
Normative	Employees managers	Work virtue/expectation	23 of 31	It is the employee's virtue to do one's best given a task that leads to overwork. There is a sense of wanting to show one's boss that one has done their best. The boss should clarify what is enough, but this is a difficult thing to do. The employees think their managers expect them to work overtime since it is seen as a virtue.
Scripts about human resource management	Company management employees Managers	Task assignment/evaluation/ career	17 of 31	Overwork is caused by the lack of individual task boundaries. Evaluations and career advancement are aligned with cooperative task assignments. Many employees fear that they will 'lose their experience' if they do not take on extra roles and responsibilities.
Market/competitive	Customers competitors	Customers' demands and competitive pressure in the market	19 of 31	Overwork arises from being overly focused on meeting deadlines and achieving the highest quality. We overwork out of fear of losing out to our competitors.
Regulative/coercive	Government	Government's labour regulations	17 of 31	Working long hours is rewarded in the 'established view of labour'.
Cultural-cognitive	Employees their families union	Cultural paradigm regarding Japanese workstyle	18 of 31	The assumption is that overtime is good because it demonstrates loyalty to the company.



government finds out. Therefore, [to avoid this], some people will voluntarily disconnect from the Internet and continue to work... [or they] adjust their work time record by noting 'I was smoking at this time' or 'I took a break from 5 to 8'. This lying game could be perilous (U-Senior Manager).

The manager expressed concern that companies might report false working hours to the government, while the health consequences of overwork worsen. This concern suggests that forcing employees to reduce working hours is not sufficient to achieve the desired outcome.

Overwork is also driven by vague job roles and task assignments. For 17 of 31 participants, overwork is encouraged by how job roles are loosely defined in their companies.

The definition of a job role is not clear for all employees. Because of this, employees willingly take on tasks beyond their assigned duties, but working time increases proportionately as a result (F-Manager).

This assertion was shared by I-Senior Manager, who argued that 'said positively everyone cooperates; said negatively, there is overlap'. A key concern among participants is the lack of individual task boundaries that lead to overwork. In this process, employees tend to overwork as they willingly cooperate beyond the loosely defined job boundary.

Additionally, this element of cooperative task assignment is aligned with evaluations and career advancement within the organisation.

We found that employees who work overtime tend to be rated more highly, even though there are no such formal evaluation criteria. A clear correlation [between working hours and career advancement] was discernible (I-Manager).

S-Manager shared a concern, stating that often 'trying hard' is rewarded, rather than productivity in her company. According to P-Manager, this reward pattern is common for 'generalist' type employees in Japanese companies, who can advance their careers by 'experiencing various tasks and roles'. He stressed that, with this pattern of 'generalist' career development, employees may fear 'loss of experience' if they do not take up various roles and extra tasks. In a similar vein, Stakeholder B explained that, in Japan, the traditional workstyle has been based on evaluations of 'employees' experience' as a rough equivalent of 'employee competency.' This means that if a person works hard and for long hours, they could become more important and receive a higher income. These comments suggest that the effectiveness of overwork reduction initiatives is constrained by the internal process of evaluations and careers, or scripts about human resource management such as 'how to hire, fire, manage performance, develop and promote people' (Braga et al., 2021, p. 71). This process is underlined by how tasks are assigned and performed

cooperatively, as well as the employee's virtue of doing one's utmost, given a task.

Furthermore, the participants (19 of 31) claimed that, while their companies seek a better work-life balance for their employees, they also experience external pressures to work long hours from customers and competitors.

Overwork does not arise from each employee's decision to work longer. Instead, it comes from customer demands to meet short delivery deadlines and achieve the highest quality required (R-Manager). Similarly, C-Senior Manager expressed concern that their customers often request meetings in the weekends or at night. A key concern among these participants is that the fear of losing out to competitors leads to overwork. In addition, for 17 of 31 participants, the current labour regulations reward overwork.

The Labour Standards Act of 1947 is a regulation that focuses on working time... based on the idea that companies should pay wages accordingly because more work leads to higher output... incompetent sales staff may work overtime until late, leading to a contradictory situation of people who work inefficiently receiving larger rewards (U-Senior Manager).

Producing an output in a short time is indeed admirable. However, if one works long hours, the output will be 50% or 100% more—it is seen as even more admirable (AA-Manager). These comments illustrate the contradictory situations that arise from the old view of labour, as assumed in the labour regulations. For Q-Manager, this view of labour may have contributed to the success of the Japanese economy in the past; however, it now has become 'a stumbling block' in addressing overwork. Our data indicate that the effectiveness of overwork reduction initiatives is constrained by external conflicts involving stakeholders. This process is linked to how the work is carried out, particularly, how companies seek to respond to customer needs excessively when they perceive a highly competitive market and the 'view of labour' assumed in labour regulations.

Further, the participants (18 of 31) emphasised the conflicts with cultural-cognitive factors that indicate collective beliefs and assumptions about Japanese workstyle held within the society. Stakeholder C offered insights into cultural-cognitive-level conflicts leading to overwork by stating that this view of labour is sharply contrasted with the one in Europe:

In Europe, everybody from the Union and the workers' families put pressure on us [management] by saying, 'I want to do my job properly, but more efficiently—how

much can I cut waste to have a life as I work?', and 'How can you allow me to do it and how can technology enable that?... In Japan, there is never a request in union meetings to 'please allow our people to work less'. It is always, 'we are loyal to the company, we want to stay more, staying more is good and overtime is good' (Stakeholder C).

The comment highlights the contrasting views of labour, or 'cultural paradigms', where unions conceptualise overtime differently. In one paradigm, overtime is a waste; in the other paradigm, overtime is good as it shows loyalty to the company (Ono, 2018). It is also noted that, in the latter paradigm, the direction is always 'more overtime' towards the 'all' end of the dichotomy, as expressed in the phrases 'we want to stay longer' and 'staying longer is good'. Stakeholder C acknowledges that 'there are good reasons why it happened' yet argues that 'there should be a way more beneficial to Japan's employee and social wellbeing than the traditional way'. One way to do it, he proposed, is to break away from the established view of labour:

Japan's cultural values are ... are based on ... cooperation between individuals, high levels of personal integrity and care for others. So we need to break the paradigm: 'I am more Japanese if I stay longer in the office'. We need to say, 'You can be a great Japanese person even if you don't stay longer in the office' (Stakeholder C).

Drawing on the influence from Japan's cultural values, N-Manager stressed the importance of cooperation.

We should respect the practice of cooperation in Japanese companies that covers for any insufficiencies [in pursuit of quality]. We cannot just dismiss this practice of cooperation as low productivity (N-Manager, IT).

Similarly, Stakeholder A said, 'Changing to job-based wages will perhaps lead to people just doing as they are told. There is no need for extra work... but which is better?' He went on to stress the need for cooperation in Japanese companies:

For the company, it is perhaps best for all employees to work as hard as possible, go the extra mile, and provide better products and services by cooperating. Therefore, ... it is better for employees to find their job rewarding while drawing on the know-how of each other, and as a result of this, to receive better wages and treatment (Stakeholder A).

Importantly, in this culturally-supported work culture, cooperation for quality has been viewed as critical to the business performance of large Japanese companies in the past. We conclude from our findings

that the effectiveness of overwork reduction initiatives in large Japanese companies is, to a degree, constrained by the cultural-cognitive and institutional context that values cooperation in the pursuit of quality. Table 2 summarises how overwork workstyle is perceived as embedded within a cultural-cognitive and institutional context that values cooperation over individual productivity.

5.3 | Stakeholder relationships for a healthy and productive workstyle

Stakeholder management involves constructing stakeholder relationships structured around organisational objectives (Mainardes et al., 2011) and enables an organisation to adapt to institutional dynamics over time (Verbeke & Tung, 2013). Consequently, we suggest that one way to change an overwork culture and its associated institutional pressures is for companies to reconstruct stakeholder relationships around renewed objectives. Adding further weight to this line of thinking, a few participants aimed to normalise a healthier and more productive workstyle in cooperation with stakeholders.

Five years ago, following a merger, our new CEO saw the massive amount of overtime work... he was quite decisive and made it very clear both inside and outside the company that we would work on workstyle reform even if it could result in a decline in short-term sales and profits (T-Manager, IT).

T-Manager further explained that within the company, a different rewards system was introduced to address the issue. In other words, their new reward system would not reward overwork; instead, productivity would be carefully evaluated. A special bonus is paid out when targets for overtime reduction and paid vacation days are met as a company. This approach meant that the saving from reduced overtime compensation would be redistributed to the employees, an introduction of a new reward system that had an immediate impact on the entire company. In other words, this company evaluated and rewarded productivity as a joint responsibility. In addition, this cooperative evaluation of productivity was aligned with each employee's individual objectives:

We tell employees to include goals for overwork reduction and increasing paid holiday usage as part of their performance objectives. If they do not achieve them, they and their immediate boss will be evaluated negatively. So, the incentives are distinctive (T-Manager).

These comments indicate that their evaluation practices align with the overtime reduction initiatives both at the company and individual employee levels. According to their corporate report, this evaluation and rewards system 'encouraged staff to pursue even more efficient working styles'. In 2017, the average overtime hours were reduced to

18 h per month compared with 35 h per month in 2009. In addition, the annual paid leave days increased to 19 days (in comparison with 13 days in 2009). This overwork reduction was achieved while operating income expanded steadily over the period.

These efforts have enabled us to entrench new working styles throughout the company, thereby realising shortened work hours and heightened productivity. The company continues to grow as a result (T-Manager).

This perspective is in stark contrast to the assumption that more labour leads to higher output, more wages, and economic growth—the ‘cultural paradigm’ traditionally accepted in large Japanese companies. Similarly, A-Company emphasised the link between their workstyle innovation and business performance. A-Senior Manager explained that ‘In our policy, work-life balance is not about just enriching personal lives. It is about enabling both personal and corporate growth’.

Internally, A-Company updated its evaluation system while instituting various leave and flexible working options. They reported that performance evaluation targets for productivity progress were set for each department, which were then translated into individual targets. These targets were fully supported by the company union. The corporate report from A-Company provided evidence of overwork reduction. In 2016, average annual work hours were reduced to 1890 (compared with 1996 h in 2014) with minimum daily work hours of 7 h and 35 min. In addition, the rate of paid leave usage increased to 89.2% (compared with 80.5% in 2014). Importantly, this progress was achieved while operating income grew over the period. While working with employees internally, T-Company engaged with external stakeholders. A key finding is that this engagement process was also centred on the ethics of cooperation.

Two years ago, our company wrote a letter to customers stating that ‘our company encourages paid annual leave, and we have set annual office holidays on which everybody will be on holiday. We have also initiated shorter working hours. We hope for your kind understanding and cooperation on this matter’ (T-Manager).

Here, T-Company sought cooperation to change their customers’ expectations regarding work hours. According to T-Manager, most of their business involves their employees on-site working in customers’ offices. In this work environment, the manager explained that it is often hard to say ‘we are leaving the office now’ when colleagues work. However, since the executive officer had made a courtesy call beforehand, customers accepted it with an understanding of ‘Oh, that thing is today’.

N-Manager praised T-Company’s approach when stating that sending letters to customers asking for cooperation is ‘quite innovative’. However, he stressed that ‘at our company, many of our customers are government agencies, and we can’t just say that we are

giving priority to regulating overtime work’. This comment indicates that customers’ cooperation cannot be easily attained in certain industries. In addition to approaching customers, S-Manager described their proactive approach to their shareholders:

The management team expected lower sales and profits [due to reducing overwork], which naturally meant lower dividends for shareholders. However, ... we surprisingly kept growing. We have dialogues with shareholders like this: ‘We’ve accomplished this much after implementing the workstyle reform. How would you assess that as a shareholder?’

(S-Manager)

Furthermore, T-Company explained their effort in working with their competitors. T-Manager stated that ‘IT companies are still seen as sweatshops with long and hard work’, and that workstyle needs to change not just in their company but also in their industry to attract excellent people and grow as an industry.

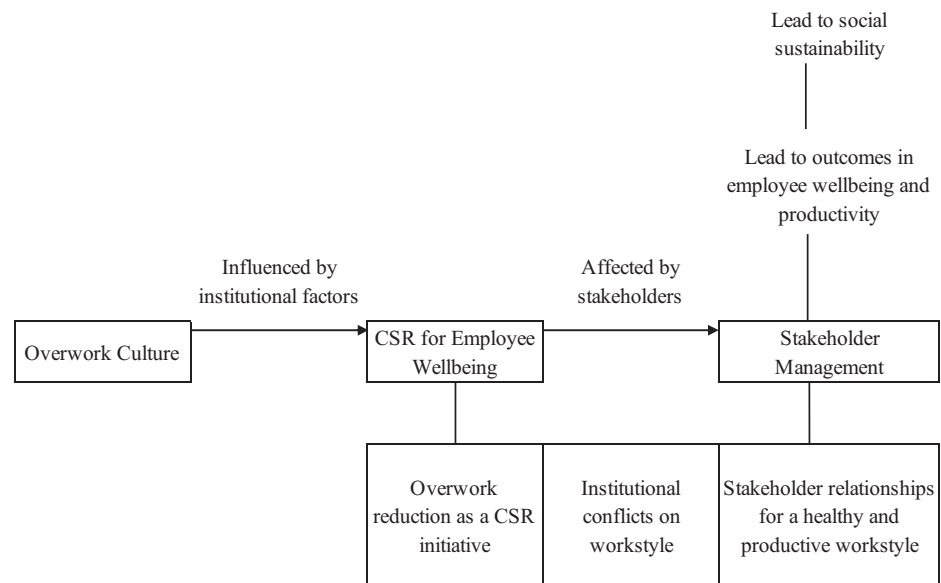
Workstyle reform is not just our company’s initiative; we open up and share our know-how so that we can all collaborate. To do so, we invited the top management of a dozen listed companies in the IT industry to come and talk about workstyle reform and wellbeing and productivity management (T-Manager).

In line with this cooperative view, C-Senior Manager stated that ‘information from industry peers helps a lot regarding labour issues’ and industry cooperation is necessary for regulating overwork. The participants thus emphasised the importance of cooperating with internal and external stakeholders to normalise a healthier and more productive workstyle.

6 | DISCUSSION

Figure 3 illustrates how sample companies actively promote overwork reduction as social responsibility. The first component represents CSR initiatives targeting overwork issue. The second component points to conflicts from institutional factors influencing workstyle, indicating the challenges in changing established work practices and norms. The final component illustrates stakeholder relationships’ role in fostering a workstyle that supports wellbeing and productivity, highlighting efforts to reconstruct these relationships for a better work environment. The text ‘Leads to Social Sustainability’ illustrates how successful stakeholder engagement in addressing overwork can promote broader social sustainability by enhancing employee wellbeing and productivity. This implies that successful CSR and stakeholder management, by challenging the norm of overwork, contributes to creating a work environment that benefits employees, companies, and society at large. In the following sections, we discuss our contributions to understanding CSR and stakeholder management for employee

FIGURE 3 Extended process diagram based on the findings. CSR, corporate social responsibility.



wellbeing and productivity, the role of stakeholder relationships in shaping overwork practices and the implications for social sustainability and ethical responsibility.

6.1 | CSR initiatives and overwork practices

We make several contributions to the understanding of CSR and stakeholder management for employee wellbeing and productivity. First, we demonstrate the limitations of the current CSR initiatives for employee wellbeing, despite the ethical and strategic intentions. Building on the previous work on CSR for employee wellbeing (Macassa et al., 2020), we show companies promote overwork reduction as their social responsibility. However, the link between overwork reduction and productivity improvement was not always clear to the participants. Only a few participants were able to demonstrate improved wellbeing and productivity outcomes. One possible explanation for this finding is the overwhelming influence of the overwork norm on overwork practice. While overwork practice may be individually and organisationally bound, the overwork norm does not rest solely with individuals or organisations (Braga et al., 2021). It also rests with stakeholders situated within the institutional and cultural context.

6.2 | The role of stakeholder relationships

Our study identified internal, external and cultural-cognitive conflicts involving both internal and external stakeholders that lead to overwork practice. We found that managers and employees seem to maintain work virtues and practices. External conflict emerged as customers and competitors maintained competitive pressures. A cultural-cognitive conflict has emerged with unions as they hold onto the virtue of cooperation for quality. Therefore, the overwork norm

does not merely reflect the 'national culture' (Thanetsunthorn, 2015) but is an integrated part of the workstyle shaped by a specific mix of stakeholder pressures and institutional factors. Accordingly, forcing overwork reduction on employees does not lead to better wellbeing outcomes, without changing the stakeholder relationships that co-produce workplace scripts (Braga et al., 2021) as well as debate about 'the type of society we want to create' (Dembe, 2009, p. 204). Our contribution to the study of CSR for employee wellbeing is then that it is not just a matter of seeking to apply a new ethical standard and control overwork practice as an internal CSR involving internal stakeholders. Instead, it requires reconstructing workstyle through new stakeholder relationships.

6.3 | Towards social sustainability and ethical responsibility

A second contribution of our study is to clarify the joint responsibilities of the companies and stakeholders regarding overwork practice. Previously, the focus of CSR research on overwork was largely on the ethical responsibilities of companies to protect employee health and wellbeing. Building on the past research, we have shown that the overwork practices are co-produced by companies and certain stakeholders who seek to maintain the existing institutional factors. This finding lends weight to the idea that both companies and stakeholders are simultaneously part of the social problem, thus companies need stakeholders to develop efficient solutions (Miller et al., 2014). Moreover, we also find evidence that both companies and their stakeholders struggle to separate themselves from institutional and cultural influence. The virtue of 'doing one's utmost' given a task and the ethics of cooperation to pursue quality have both been argued to be positive traits of Japanese employees, but they seem at odds with reducing overwork. Within a historical context, local virtues and norms are not necessarily unethical despite problematic



consequences. This situation fits within Braga's (2021, p. 72) description of the 'ontological battle to change what is taken for granted'. From a CSR perspective, the challenge is changing the entrenched overwork culture with unethical consequences. Braga et al. (2021) suggest that ethical HRM is shaped by actors that construct its practice within specific conditions. In a dynamic institutional environment, both companies and their stakeholders operate as actors (Brammer et al., 2012). Building on these perspectives, we suggest that an overwork culture results from stakeholder relationships. Companies and stakeholders are both responsible for effecting a change in 'what is taken for granted' through examining the stakeholder relationships.

Our third contribution is to highlight the possibility for companies to leverage cultural-cognitive processes, to restructure stakeholder relationships. Cultural-cognitive contexts that value hard work, quality and cooperation contribute to overwork culture. This finding confirms the cultural causes such as self-sacrifice and collectivism influence overwork (Kang et al., 2017; Tatliyer & Gur, 2022). Although this explains the persistence of overwork, it does not guide cultural change. In contrast, some participants leveraged the virtue of cooperation in reducing overwork. Companies with better wellbeing and productivity outcomes emphasised the role of stakeholder management for 'cooperative performance' rather than 'individual performance'. These companies seem to be reconstructing new ways of 'cooperating' with stakeholders, to achieve a renewed objective of employee wellbeing and productivity collectively. Our findings indicate that CSR and stakeholder management achieve better outcomes not by condemning but leveraging societal 'cultural-cognitive processes'.

We also explore how CSR and stakeholder management can contribute to social sustainability through a change in overwork culture. The literature acknowledges stakeholders' joint responsibility in resolving social issues (Freudenreich et al., 2020). Both companies and stakeholders, as part of the social problem, must collaborate for solutions (Miller et al., 2014). This paper pays attention to how CSR and stakeholder management for employee wellbeing and productivity are influenced by overwork culture produced by a web of stakeholder relationships (Freudenreich et al., 2020) embedded within normative, cultural and competitive contexts (Braga et al., 2021). Our findings show that CSR and stakeholder management can change overwork culture by reconstructing the web of stakeholder relationships, through which, the new institutional and cultural dynamics are actualised. Thus, building upon the suggestion that stakeholder management allows an organisation to adapt to institutional dynamics over time (Verbeke & Tung, 2013), our findings suggest that CSR and stakeholder management should aim at effecting a change in normalised work culture.

These findings and contributions have implications for ethical responsibility of stakeholders. The problem of overwork arises because an organisation's primary ethical obligation is to provide its employees with a safe and healthy working environment (Kaptein, 2008). Companies and their stakeholders seek to change the overwork norm and culture, which has been taken for granted within the society. Evidence shows sample companies seek to uphold this ethical obligation and social responsibility and control employee

working hours under stricter government regulations. Yet, ethical duty or regulation alone does not resolve persistent overwork. Similarly, a business case approach alone does not effect change. We found some evidence that changing overwork norms and practices requires contributions from internal and external stakeholders, which then influence the institutional dynamics of society. In the context of society at large and social sustainability, our findings suggest that ethical responsibility for reducing overwork resides not only with organisations but also with stakeholders.

7 | CONCLUSION

This paper extends overwork and CSR research by examining stakeholder management's role in overwork culture. We present overwork as a result of stakeholder interactions within normalised workstyles, beyond previous perspectives of overwork as an ethical problem. Addressing overwork culture requires redefining workstyles in cooperation with stakeholders, moving beyond the limitations of current CSR initiatives that fail to fully address deep-rooted institutional and cultural forces. Presenting empirical evidence, we provide actionable insights for real change in work patterns. Our findings advocate for a proactive, culturally aware approach to CSR, enhancing productivity and wellbeing to foster social sustainability.

This paper offers practical implications for public policy, highlighting the government's roles as a stakeholder in shaping overwork culture. We acknowledge Japan's Workstyle Reform Act and its effort to cap overtime hours. This paper suggests that, despite these efforts, a multifaceted approach is needed due to overwork's institutional and cultural roots. The government must reassess labour laws that link overtime to loyalty. It should develop a compensation model that values performance and cooperation, enhancing wellbeing and productivity. With training and support, the government can aid the transition to this new employment model, reflecting its responsibility for regulatory pressures that currently incentivise long working hours.

This paper discusses CSR's role in overcoming institutional norms for managers and stakeholders. Companies face pressures to integrate CSR with business strategies for social performance. However, our research indicates that normalised work practices, under institutional pressures, often constrain such CSR integration. Managers should identify barriers and find ways to overcome them. In promoting CSR for employee wellbeing, managers can adopt stakeholder management that respects cultural values to transform work expectations. Following outlined processes (Figure 3), they can work through conflicts and rebuild stakeholder relationships. This approach aims to reduce overwork, enhance wellbeing, performance and social sustainability.

There are, however, some limitations to the findings. The generalisability of the findings is limited, as the study is mainly based on interviews with managers from 31 large Japanese companies. The study's focus on managers in large companies suggest that it may not fully capture the perspectives of lower-level employees and part-time

workers within these companies, as well as those in small to medium-sized companies, who could experience overwork differently. To develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics of overwork, future research could benefit from adopting a more inclusive approach that encompasses a wider range of both companies and workforce segments. Additionally, since the research captures a specific moment in time, it may not fully account for the evolution of workplace practices and the longitudinal effects of overwork reduction initiatives. A broader temporal analysis in future studies could provide deeper insights into the changing impact of these initiatives. There is also a possible limitation due to interview bias. Data were collected from interviews with CSR managers and managers in charge of employee wellbeing issues; thus, the comments of the interviewees are potentially biased towards CSR-conscious perspectives. Finally, it is crucial to consider the local and cultural differences that shape the concept of wellbeing in society (Lewis et al., 2007) and thus, ways to meet these needs and in what combinations are socially constructed (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Therefore, themes and initiatives reported in this paper can be seen as exemplars of CSR and social sustainability issues in a specific context and pointers for other social contexts. It would be useful to conduct research in another social context and examine the findings' validity and applicability, given the increasing prevalence of overwork across different societies. Therefore, future research should investigate how organisations across different societies can reconfigure stakeholder dynamics to effectively challenge the entrenched institutional and cultural factors that perpetuate overwork.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF PARTICIPATING COMPANIES, STAKEHOLDERS, AND INFORMANTS

No.	Company	Industry	Role/responsibilities
1	A	Food and beverage	Senior Manager, CSR
2	B	Food and beverage	Manager, CSR
3	C	Housing construction	Senior Manager, CSR
4	D	Securities	Manager, CSR
5	E	Apparel	Senior Manager, Human Resource, Diversity and Inclusion
6	F	Chemical	Manager, CSR
7	G	Office Solutions	Manager, CSR
8	H	Automobile	Manager, Corporate Planning
9	I	Airline	Senior Manager, Corporate Citizenship, Diversity
10	J	Heavy Industries	Executive Officer, CSR
11	K	Convenience Store	Senior Manager, Human Resource
12	L	Automobile	Manager, Human Resource
13	M	Chemical	Manager, Corporate Strategy
14	N	IT	Manager, Diversity, CSR and Social Contribution
15	O	Telecommunications	Manager, CSR
16	P	Transportation	Manager, CSR
17	Q	Electronics	Manager, Human Resource
18	R	Electronics	Manager, Human Resource, Diversity
19	S	Office Equipment	Manager, CSR
20	T	IT	Manager, CSR
21	U	Housing construction	Senior Manager, CSR
22	V	Banking	Senior Manager, CSR
23	W	Insurance	Manager, CSR, Human Capital
24	X	Housing construction	Manager, Workstyle Reform
25	Y	Food and beverage	Senior Manager, CSR
26	Z	Construction	Senior Manager, CSR
27	AA	Chemical	Manager, Workstyle Reform, Diversity
28	AB	Insurance	Manager, CSR
29	AC	Printing and Electronics	Senior Manager, CSR
30	AD	Chemical	Manager, CSR
31	AE	Housing	Manager, ESG (environmental, social and governance)
No.	Stakeholder		
1	A	Director of the national union centre	
2	B	Director of industry labour union	
3	C	European CEO of the Japan-based operation of a multinational company	
4	D	Senior Manager of a national business association and labour specialist	
5	E	Occupational health physician/advocate for health and productivity management	
6	F	Leader of a civil organisation advocating work-life balance	
No.	Informant		
1	A	Sociologist	
2	B	Business ethics researcher	
3	C	Labour economist	
4	D	Labour law researcher	

Abbreviation: CSR, corporate social responsibility.



APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Questions for managers

1. Can you describe your role in the company?
2. How does your company define social responsibility for the workforce?
3. What initiatives does your company have to respond to the expectations?

4. How does your company integrate these initiatives into strategy?
5. Some say the progress in these areas in Japan is limited, compared to the expectations and concerns. What do you think?

Questions for stakeholders/informants

1. How do you see the progress of corporate approaches?
2. Which stakeholders share the responsibility for the progress?
What can companies do with the stakeholders?