

Speech Tanja van der Lippe, Professor of Sociology

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be standing before you today.

'Busy, busy, busy'. This, I'm sure, is a feeling familiar to us all.

We are living in a society where it seems time waits for no one, and we're switched on all the time, everywhere. And for some of us it poses quite a challenge, whilst sitting here in the Dom Church, not to briefly rove in other worlds, glance at our iPhones, check the latest headlines, read our newest emails.

The numbers show that you're not alone in feeling busy and stressed. Here in the Netherlands, more than 35% of people experience frequent or constant work stress. At universities, the figure is even 42%. Studies correlate this to reduced wellbeing, health issues, conflicts at home and absenteeism from work. In this country, one million people report symptoms of burn out.

Is this an exclusively Dutch phenomenon? Of course not. European analyses show that workplace stress is ubiquitous. In the EU, on average 30% of the working population feels their job is very intense, demanding too much energy and constantly keeping lots of balls in the air. On top of this, the Dutch also tend to have a myriad of extracurricular ambitions. We are amongst the most ardent volunteers in Europe, engage in relatively more sports and fitness activities and are also extremely active on the cultural front. We even speed-walk through our daily lives, outpaced by only one other country worldwide. Which country might that be...? The Dutch, in short, are busy bees with no time to spare.

Time has been described as the most fundamental scarce resource in our economy. Everything we do, plan or aspire to is constrained by the fact that there are only 24 hours in a day. 'Time, unlike other human resources, cannot be accumulated', said Linder in his 1970 classic on hurried humans. Being busy seems to be intrinsic to modern life. So that raises the question: Is Western work stress an individual problem, or a societal problem? Are our formal and informal institutions making sufficient provisions for our finite time?

Because why would we allow ourselves to be drawn into working longer and harder than we prefer and than is good for us and for those we care about? Is it because we don't see a choice? Is it to 'keep up with the Joneses' – trapping us in a vicious cycle of working and consuming that leaves little time to enjoy the fruits of our labours? Or is it because we are personally accountable for reaching targets and deadlines?

Certainly, this is a problem that affects all of us. Being that our society is centred strongly on the individual, we tend to look for root causes at an individual level. However, I'm going to convince you that this is in fact a societal problem. And the distinction is vital, because solutions to societal problems are fundamentally different from solutions to individual problems.

There are at least **four societal reasons** why we are so busy, why we sometimes can't cope with the pressures of work, and why life is more of a balancing act than ever.

These four reasons that I want to lay out for you testify that our institutions have come to chafe and pinch or no longer fit at all, or have become excessive; that the rules of the game, the organisations in which we work, the authorities we answer to and the public opinions and standards to which we're held are in need of change.

But before I do that, I should also point to the bright side. To the fact that study upon study shows we as a nation are amongst the happiest in the world. And that, of course, being so busy is, for each of us, part of a bigger picture, a complex reality, and at times it can also give us a positive charge. But be this as it may, sometimes all that pressure threatens to overwhelm us.

Let me start with the first societal reason. This has to do with imbalances in the Dutch labour market. Objectively, the average Dutch person is actually not even all that busy. Compared to the rest of Europe, we spend the least time on paid work and caregiving. Yet, averages, as so often, tell us little. There is a wide gap in the Netherlands between the insiders and the outsiders; between the highly productive workers and those unable to keep pace, those limping along or completely out of the race. There is also a large segment of the workforce whose potential is not being fully harvested, both in quality and quantity: half of women don't work, or they work jobs of less than 28 hours a week, and there is no investment in working seniors, to say nothing of all the untapped talent in the Turkish and Moroccan-Dutch population. Studies show that these conditions go hand in hand with excessive demand on those who *are* employed, whose work intensity is too high, who are constantly balancing on a tightrope. Besides job stress and inequity, over the long term this also has far-reaching unintended consequences. Such as rising opportunity and income inequality, deeper rifts between the haves and the have-nots – usually the grads and the non-grads – and the attendant divisions in democratic and political trust. Increased job flexibility also feeds into this imbalance. Particularly young adults now entering the workforce can expect flexible contracts and indeterminate career paths and all the uncertainty and stress this provokes. This may also be a factor behind why female graduates with flexible job contracts are waiting longer these days to have children than those with permanent contracts. This is certainly food for thought in an era where flexibility reigns supreme, also at our university.

The second reason has to do with how we live our lives. It goes without saying that working parents with young children are particularly strapped for time, the need to continually shift gears between responsibilities making them – especially women – feel harried and stressed, as the Netherlands Institute for Social Research and others have reported. But also during other life phases it has become more of a challenge to keep juggling all of our responsibilities. That's true for young jobseekers, as I just mentioned, but even for students, who are under immense pressure to perform. And then later on in life, starting from the mid-career phase, longer lifespans and a growing population of chronically ill are thrusting a caregiver role on the middle-aged workforce – care which, to add insult to injury, the government now expects everyone to sort out themselves. One in three working women and one in seven working men in this phase of life provides care to a family member. Studies show that this group is under immense pressure and is dependent on the support they get from other family members, as well as, crucially, from their employers – support which, our own research proves, many employers are not equipped to provide. All of this is adding up to keep us busy throughout life. Here as well, institutions are adding to the pressure, possibly for universities too.

The third reason, and one that certainly deserves mention in present company, is accountability. First off, let it be clear that we *need* accountability. Accounting for how we spend time and money, and monitoring and transparency, are all to the good. However, there's a sense now that this country is getting tripped up in its own red tape, which speaks to a lack of trust underpinned by lots of sham security. We're surrounded by entities and systems that are intended to provide social safety nets and protections, but at the same time to keep tabs on us, and that's creating a vicious cycle. Take the healthcare sector, where in almost Taylorist fashion each and every action has to be recorded in detail and verified. So too at universities, where a lamentable chunk of the available time and budget is no longer invested in the work itself.

The fourth reason is that we always have to be switched on, and that the competition is fierce. This form of organisation was characterised by the sociologist Lewis Coser as the 'greedy institution', which expects commitment at all times. In part, this is attributable to digitisation. These days, employees are on standby 24/7 and can continuously check their messages. This is especially true in professional organisations, where a large share of staff are graduates who are individually accountable. As Dutch academia has expressed it in the hashtag 'higher education in action', there quite simply is too much work. Our jobs require an increasing variety of tasks in the same amount of time and are never 'done', which translates into lots of overtime. At its most extreme, this has given us the infamous Japanese phenomenon of *karōshi*: death from overwork. Studies show that even when there are policies and schemes in place to create balance, parental leave being one, employees do not always take advantage, especially when those employees are men. Incidentally, our own research reveals that this changes when men in management positions lead by example.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope that I have convinced you that work stress is a societal problem, and that to beat it we need to reappraise how we structure our institutions. Some institutions are worth preserving and modifying, others are past saving. How do we do this, you ask? While it will certainly not be easy, I can offer hope, and a task, both for ourselves, and for our university. It is clear that, alone, we will achieve little. We have to **work together**. So I am pleased that Utrecht University has chosen to work in hubs that will strengthen ties with the outside world and can work side by side with stakeholders to find solutions to the big societal questions. Thus, in our Future of Work hub, part of our strategic theme of Institutions for Open Societies, we are partnering with business and government to devise solutions for a resilient future, a future with less work stress and more balance and welfare.

Collaboration between different disciplines is essential. Modifying existing institutions and creating new ones will not automatically bring about the desired changes in behaviour. For that, we must look beyond the boundaries of our own disciplines; we have to practise interdisciplinarity, as we do in our Sustainable Cooperation towards a Resilient Society Gravitation Programme, bringing together scientists in fields like sociology, psychology, history and philosophy. This programme is also helping to identify possible solutions to work stress. I would like to share with you these potential solutions and what they demand of us as a university.

First of all is the recognition that individuals fulfil different roles over the course of life, and are not only employees. Incidentally, whereas I've talked primarily about employees

today, some of these problems and possible solutions apply equally to students. Instead of negative spillover between work, family and community that ratchets up the pressure, our various roles should enrich each other. Accommodate the needs of different groups of employees in different life phases and offer them the means to shape common objectives and shared identities. In this constellation, diversity is an advantage, not a drawback.

Second is to shift the vicious cycle of compulsive monitoring and accountability towards a situation in which mutual dependencies in the work process act to strengthen commitment and solidarity among employees. For example, in self-reinforcing cooperative arrangements. In our work, this would impel smaller teams, which tend to seek common values and cooperation more than do complex bureaucracies.

Third is to avoid the organisational principles of the greedy institution, of always being switched on. Everyone should be permitted a moment of respite. Possibly by restructuring the academic year, as has been suggested before, but also – and I cannot emphasise this enough – through a better proportionality between permanent and flexible job contracts.

Whereas my focus here has been mainly on those in paid work, let's not forget that there are also groups that are being left on the sidelines, whose capacities are not being fully utilised. We have to consider, therefore, whether increasing labour market competition and flexibility may also be exacerbating mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have our work cut out for us to achieve this balancing act. But not today. Because today is the opening of the academic year, a day when we celebrate the return to our vocation, which is a joyful occasion. If there is one lesson the research has to teach us, it is that we must treasure these festive moments and celebrate them with each other, because that relieves pressure and boosts wellbeing. Or, to paraphrase Ecclesiastes: 'There is a time for work, there is a time for rest.' Thank you.