Stress, Overload, and a More Sustainable Life · About 4 minutes

The Work Around the Visible Task

Seeing what a responsibility actually asks of you

The receipt says “cabinet.” There is no line for the afternoon spent getting someone to approve buying it.

This is Carmen's fictional task at work. Described as a purchase, it looks small. Described as the responsibility she carried, it becomes easier to understand why the day felt full.

Count the decisions as well as the result

Much work is visible only when it fails. Someone notices the supply before it runs out, remembers the deadline, or follows up because a reassuring answer wasn't a confirmed arrangement. When it goes smoothly, others see the finished item and may never encounter the attention required to produce it.

Competence can deepen the invisibility. Carmen knows whom to call and what might go wrong. Her skill helps her manage the task, but it doesn't remove the interruptions or the need to keep track. She may be good at work that is also costly.

An accurate account should include what other people did too. Perhaps a colleague arranged part of the delivery. Perhaps Carmen checked something unnecessarily. Naming hidden work is most useful when it aims for precision, rather than the largest possible description of the burden.

A task changes when you are answerable for an outcome but cannot make the decisions it requires. Carmen can research a replacement, yet she cannot approve the purchase or control the supplier. The delay may appear under her name even though she cannot resolve it alone.

Maslach and Leiter's review of occupational burnout considers workload alongside control, reward, community, fairness, and values.[1] The framework widens attention beyond personal efficiency. It doesn't diagnose Carmen from a demanding day, but it helps us ask whether the setting itself needs to change.

A better calendar cannot authorize an expense. Greater concentration cannot make a supplier reliable. Sometimes the relevant conversation concerns authority, staffing, or dependencies rather than time management.

Carmen might replace “I took too long ordering a cabinet” with a brief account of the sequence: measurements, approval, scheduling, installation, and follow-up. The useful question then becomes where the time and attention went, and which parts she could reasonably control.

A similar inquiry can help at home, though a workplace burnout model does not explain every family arrangement. Who notices that a plan needs making? Who watches for gaps? Who organizes the alternative? Answers may reveal shared care or work that has become one person's default responsibility.

Recognizing that work does not excuse a missed update or erase an agreement. Carmen may still owe someone an apology. A fuller account can make the response specific: what did she miss, and what prevented the rest from moving?

The cabinet receipt leaves much of what Carmen carried off the page.

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When they talk about the deadline, put the afternoon back into the account. Somebody had to spend it doing that work.

Companion reading · When There Is More to Carry Than One Life Can Hold

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Stress, Overload, and a More Sustainable Life (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2016). Understanding the burnout experience: Recent research and its implications for psychiatry. World Psychiatry, 15(2), 103–111. Source.

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