

Too qualified to flow? The role of anti-work orientation in the overqualification-flow relationship

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Abstract: Flow is defined as a psychological state of deep immersion and full engagement in tasks, which comprises three dimensions – absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic work motivation – and has been associated with high levels of workplace well-being. However, factors such as perceived overqualification may undermine this positive experience. The present study aims to investigate whether perceived overqualification was negatively associated with flow at work and whether this relationship was mediated by anti-work orientation, which reflects negative attitudes toward work. The study included 339 workers from different generations and followed a quantitative research design. The results revealed a significant negative association between perceived overqualification and the flow state, as well as a significant and positive association between perceived overqualification and anti-work orientation. Although the results also suggested that anti-work orientation was negatively associated with the work enjoyment and intrinsic work motivation dimensions of flow, the mediating role of anti-work orientation was not confirmed. Some differences between groups were also explored, mainly regarding generational differences. The results contribute to a deeper understanding of the influence of perceived overqualification and anti-work orientation on the experience of flow, a relationship that remains underexplored in literature.

Keywords: Perceived overqualification, Flow at work, Anti-work orientation.

Introduction

Work often provides meaning in life and represents a pivotal dimension of one's existence. Although economic factors are relevant when choosing a job, it is important to recognize that financial considerations may not be workers' sole priority (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Besides financial security, many individuals seek opportunities through work to achieve satisfaction and a sense of purpose in life, both of which are critical to their overall well-being (Kubo et al., 2013). To achieve this sense of purpose, workers expect to have the opportunity to experience moments of complete involvement and connection with their work activities (Devotto et al., 2020). This deep engagement, which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described as "flow", represents the holistic feeling that people experience when they act with total engagement. Flow represents the experience of working at full potential, characterized by intense involvement, effortless action, and a balance between personal skills and environmental challenges (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). When in a state of flow, individuals engage in the activity with the

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purpose of experiencing the pleasure and intrinsic satisfaction it offers (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this state, actions flow almost automatically, requiring minimal conscious intervention, as individuals become fully immersed in the task at hand. Additionally, flow is a peak experience that can vary significantly across different performance episodes, both throughout a day and at different times for the same person (Bakker & Woerkom, 2017).

Although initially most research focused on the experience of flow in leisure and sports activities due to their voluntary nature, studies by Csikszentmihalyi (1997, cited in Bakker & Woerkom, 2017) revealed that flow is often more present in work than in leisure. This is because many of the factors that enhance these experiences – such as clear goals, task meaning, autonomy, skill variety, balance between challenges and competencies, feedback, and development opportunities – are more frequently manifested in work settings, being associated with certain job characteristics. Certain characteristics can act as job resources, giving meaning to tasks, encouraging employee accountability, and providing feedback on performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1980, cited in Salanova et al., 2006). These resources also have the potential to reduce the impact of job demands, helping to mitigate the stressful effects they can produce (Bakker & Woerkom, 2017). Overall, the state of flow is more likely to occur when workers face challenges in their jobs and have the resources to adequately cope with these demands, as illustrated by the Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) model proposed by Demerouti et al. (2001). An alternative approach that explores the factors preceding flow is the Challenge-Hindrance Stressor Model (Cavanaugh et al., 2000). In this model, challenging demands refer to tasks and working conditions that require the application of various competencies and skills, demanding effort and energy, but can promote growth, learning, and goal achievement. These conditions are intrinsically rewarding and may facilitate flow experiences. On the contrary, situations that require significant effort but do not offer opportunities for development tend to hinder flow experiences (Bakker & Woerkom, 2017). This highlights a strong association between core job characteristics, the variety of skills required, and the experience of flow itself.

Although flow is often related to external factors, studies such as those by Bakker and Woerkom (2017) emphasize the active role of the individual in promoting it. Based on Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), studies suggest that strategies such as self-leadership and job crafting can facilitate the experience of flow. However, predictors such as task complexity, work-related challenges, and the possibility of customizing activities play a crucial role. When job characteristics do not provide minimal conditions, such as the use of skills or the achievement of meaningful goals, reaching flow becomes challenging, even with personal efforts (Bakker et al., 2014), emphasizing the importance of the interaction between individual and organisational resources to foster this experience. Additionally, the constant pursuit of a deeper sense of meaning in work becomes more complex as nowadays work may lack intrinsic psychological meaning and may be shaped according to the socio-cultural context to which individuals are exposed, a context that is generally in constant transformation (Gonçalves & Coimbra, 2003). More practical concerns emerge and may influence how individuals perceive the role of work in their lives. One example is the increasing demands regarding education and professional qualifications required to enter the labor market, which have intensified over time, leading individuals to pursue more qualifications to get the jobs they desire (Fernandes et al., 2012).

In the Portuguese context, a few decades ago most workers had lower qualifications, however the current scenario is the opposite. Nevertheless, the high proportion of young people with higher education qualifications, combined with a labor market that is unable to adequately absorb this level of qualification, has led to a mismatch between workers' skills and the demands of the positions they occupy, highlighting an underutilization of qualified human resources (ECO, 2023). This phenomenon directly impacts the quality of employment among young people, affecting both their motivations and their career progression (ECO, 2024).

This perceived mismatch between one's competencies and the opportunities provided by the job has been referred to as perceived overqualification (POQ). POQ is defined as workers'

perception that they possess abilities and skills that exceed those required for the work they perform (mismatch), which is also associated with the perception of few opportunities to utilize these skills in the workplace (no-grow), interpreting it as a lack of challenge (Feldman, 1996; Maltarich et al., 2011). According to Person-Job Fit theory (Kristof, 1996), employees form perceptions related to the extent their work provides certain extrinsic and intrinsic benefits and rewards, such as salary and a sense of accomplishment (Cable & Edwards, 2004). The perceived value of these components is cognitively compared with the values desired by the individual, shaped by their underlying psychological needs. When these needs are unmet, workers feel they are underutilizing their skills and that their potential is unrecognized, resulting in feelings of dissatisfaction (Luksyte et al., 2011) and injustice (Im et al., 2023). Erdogan et al. (2018) highlighted the Relative Deprivation Theory as the most used to explain the detrimental effects of overqualification. This theory posits that when individuals believe they are entitled to a certain outcome, they consider it desirable, but when they do not receive it, they experience a sense of deprivation (Crosby, 1984, cited in Erdogan et al., 2018).

In this sense, and in light of the perception of the unchallenging characteristics that the job offers, research has shown that overqualification carries risks for individual well-being comparable to those resulting from unemployment (Wassermann & Hoppe, 2019). Given these work conditions, individuals tend to feel frustrated in their workplace, both by the sense of stagnation and the unmet expectations (Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013). However, there is a lack of studies focusing on the effects of POQ on flow, as the first goal of the present study is to mitigate this gap by verifying to what extent POQ relates to flow.

Employees who perceive themselves as overqualified tend to exhibit lower levels of autonomous motivation to apply their skills in managing and adapting to changes, especially when these require additional effort and persistence (Griffin et al., 2007). This dynamic aligns with the perspective of Eccles and Wigfield (2002), which states that even when people are confident they can perform a task, they may not have compelling reasons to do it. Thus, when their abilities exceed the demands of the role but are not adequately recognized or utilized, these workers tend to show lower intrinsic motivation and weak identification with their role, reflecting a mismatch between person and function (Luksyte et al., 2011). Based on the above, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1. Perceived overqualification is negatively related to levels of flow at work.

When perceiving overqualification, the role of work in the construction of personal identity becomes compromised, as the absence of meaningful challenges and goals limits individuals' ability to become deeply engaged and derive meaning from their work experiences (Fernandes et al., 2012), which may contribute to a negative view of work itself, generating frustration and demotivation (Maynard et al., 2006). This feeling of inadequacy, in which individuals begin to perceive work as a source of dissatisfaction, leads them to question its value and relevance to personal well-being and the achievement of goals outside the professional sphere. These may contribute to the development of a critical perspective toward work named Anti-Work Orientation (AWO) (Maynard et al., 2006), which questions the centrality of work in people's lives and challenges the idea that individual worth is intrinsically linked to productivity. Alongside this, growing disillusionment with economic systems (Alliger, 2021), cynicism towards modern organizations and the overall value of work (Graeber, 2018), and resistance to disrespectful or abusive work relationships (Barclay & Saldanha, 2015) constitute a set of interconnected factors boosting the growth of the anti-work movement and practices like "quiet quitting" and "acting your wage" – forms of silent protest where widespread dissatisfaction with demands that exceed formal job expectations lead employees to limit their effort, dedication, and involvement strictly to what aligns with their pay and job role (Eypósson & Innanen, 2024; Formica & Sfodera, 2022).

The anti-work movement includes perspectives that question the excessive centrality of work in individuals' lives and challenge the idea that personal worth should be primarily defined by productivity and occupational success (Alliger & McEachern, 2024; Scruggs, 2023). Although anti-work orientation shares similarities with constructs such as organizational cynicism, disengagement, and low work centrality, important distinctions should be noted. Organizational cynicism is primarily directed toward the employing organization (Dean et al., 1998). In contrast, anti-work orientation reflects a broader questioning of the meaning, value, and role of work in individuals' lives. Likewise, disengagement and withdrawal behaviors concern reduced involvement or behavioral responses at work, while anti-work orientation represents a more general attitudinal stance toward work itself. This is also a generational issue. Generations refer to groups of individuals born within 15 to 20 years, who, throughout their lives, have been shaped by similar cultural events and social conditions (Benson & Brown, 2011). While previous generations adopted a "work-to-live" philosophy (Calhoun & Strasser, 2005), newer generations reject the idea of evaluating people solely by their occupations, distancing themselves from workaholic culture. Instead, they seek a healthy balance between work and personal life, valuing recognition and dignity at work and aspiring to occupations that are both meaningful and rewarding (Alexander, 2024).

Although anti-work orientation appears increasingly relevant in contemporary work settings, little is known about its antecedents and consequences in organizational research. Moreover, previous studies have rarely examined perceived overqualification, anti-work orientation, and flow at work within the same framework. Thus, the present study aims to contribute to the literature by examining whether anti-work orientation mediates the relationship between perceived overqualification and flow at work. These phenomena have led workers to recognize that work goes beyond being merely a source of livelihood, also being an essential part of their identity, social relationships, and personal fulfillment. Research shows that lack of connection or purpose at work can result in emotional exhaustion (Wharton, 1993), increased stress, and reduced motivation (Adamopoulos & Syrou, 2022). These factors can lead to decreased organisational citizenship behaviors and increased counterproductive behaviors in the workplace (Fox, 2001). On the other hand, workers who perceive their job as meaningful tend to have better mental and physical health, greater satisfaction, engagement, and productivity (Niebuhr et al., 2022).

We therefore propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Anti-work orientation mediates the relationship between perceived overqualification and flow at work, such that higher perceived overqualification is associated with stronger anti-work orientation, which in turn is associated with lower levels of flow.

Considering that AWO seems to be a generational phenomenon, as an additional goal, we will also examine possible differences across generations (Figure 1).

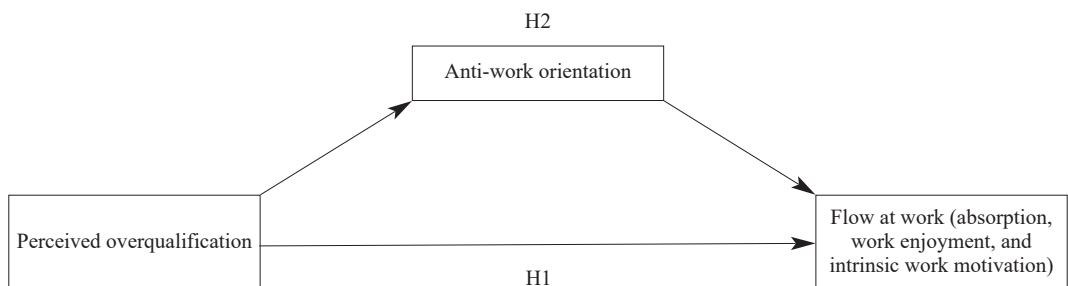


Figure 1. Proposed theoretical model examining the mediating role of anti-work orientation in the relationship between perceived overqualification and flow at work

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 339 participants, of whom 41.3% were female, and 58.7% were male. Regarding generational distribution, 4.4% of the sample belonged to the Baby Boomer generation (1946-1964), 42.5% to Generation X (1965-1980), 32.2% to the Millennial generation (1981-1996), and 20.9% to Generation Z (1997-2012) (Dimock, 2019). In terms of academic qualifications, 39.8% of participants had an educational level equivalent to or below high school completion, 13% were currently attending higher education, and 46.6% held a bachelor's degree or higher qualification. Regarding organisational tenure, participants had an average of 12.01 years with the company. The variation between the minimum value of 1 year and the maximum of 48 years highlights heterogeneity in organisational tenure, with some employees being recent hires and others having long-standing careers within the organization.

Instruments

Perceived Overqualification. To measure participants' perceptions regarding the fit between their qualifications and the demands of their current position, the Perceived Overqualification Scale developed by Maynard et al. (2006) was used, in a version adapted to Portuguese. The scale is unidimensional and consists of 9 items. Participants responded to the items using a 5-point Likert-type scale, in which 1 corresponded to "strongly disagree" and 5 to "strongly agree". A sample item is "I have more abilities than I need in order to do my job". Confirmatory Factorial Analysis presented adequate results ($\chi^2/df = 1.86$; RMSEA = 0.07; CFI = 0.97; TLI = 0.95). Regarding reliability, Cronbach alpha presented an adequate value (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.85$).

Flow. The subjective experience of immersion, focus, and satisfaction while performing professional activities was measured using the Work-Related Flow Inventory (WOLF) developed by Arnold Bakker (2008), translated and adapted into Portuguese by Devotto et al. (2020). This scale consists of 13 items distributed across three dimensions: Absorption, Work Enjoyment, and Intrinsic Work Motivation. Sample items included "When I'm working, I don't think about anything else" (absorption), "My job makes me feel good" (work enjoyment), and "I feel motivated by the work itself, not by what I get paid for it" (intrinsic work motivation). Participants responded to the items using a 5-point Likert-type scale, in which 1 corresponded to "never" and 5 to "always". Confirmatory Factorial Analysis presented adequate results ($\chi^2/df = 2.56$; RMSEA = 0.07; CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.94). Regarding reliability, Cronbach's alpha presented an adequate value in all dimensions (Absorption $\alpha = .70$; Work Enjoyment $\alpha = .91$; Intrinsic Work Motivation $\alpha = .72$).

Anti-Work Orientation. To assess individuals' predisposition toward attitudes and beliefs opposing the traditional view of work as a central element of life, the Anti-Work Orientation Scale developed by Scruggs (2024) was used, in a version adapted to the Portuguese. The scale is unidimensional and consists of 10 items. Participants responded to the items using a 5-point Likert-type scale, in which 1 corresponded to "strongly disagree" and 5 to "strongly agree". Sample items included "Society mistakenly teaches us that the best way to find meaning is through work" and "I feel the urge to question the value we attribute to work". Confirmatory Factorial Analysis presented adequate results ($\chi^2/df = 1.74$; RMSEA = 0.05; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.98). Regarding reliability, Cronbach alpha presented an adequate value (Cronbach $\alpha = .86$).

Procedure

The sample size for this study was estimated using the G*Power software. To assess the proposed relationships between the variables, a statistical power of .95, a significance level of .05, and a medium effect size of $f = .15$ were considered as the required number of participants for this study was estimated at 120. According to Marôco (2010), five responses per item would also be required. Since the questionnaire included 32 items, a minimum of 160 responses was necessary to ensure an adequate sample size for proceeding with the study. After establishing 160 responses as the minimum threshold, a total of 339 responses were collected.

Subsequently, an online questionnaire was created using the QualtricsXM platform. Following this stage, the questionnaire was distributed and remained open for responses from November 2024 to January 2025. Participants were invited to take part in the study through social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook, where the questionnaire link hosted on QualtricsXM was shared and participants were encouraged to forward it to others. These characteristics resulted in a convenience, voluntary, and non-probabilistic sample obtained through the snowball sampling method.

Once participants accessed the questionnaire link, the survey was divided into sections. Initially, an informed consent form was presented, clarifying the study's objective, inclusion criteria, approximate duration of participation, confidentiality, risks and benefits, and the voluntary nature of participation. To ensure participants' consent, a direct question regarding their understanding of the study and willingness to participate was included. After consent was provided, participants were directed to the following section, which included sociodemographic questions (gender, age group, educational qualifications, and number of years in the company). The age group intervals presented in this section were defined according to the typology proposed by Consultancy.uk (2015, as cited in Cilliers, 2017): Baby Boomers included individuals born between 1945 and 1965, followed by Generation X, comprising those born between 1966 and 1979. Generation Y, also known as Millennials, included individuals born between 1980 and 1995. Finally, Generation Z refers to individuals born from 1996 onward.

Subsequently, one section was dedicated to each scale, in which the items were presented in a fixed order, following the same presentation sequence for all participants. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statements or the frequency with which a given experience occurred in their workplace. Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants were thanked for their participation and collaboration, and an email address was provided through which they could make contact in case of questions or concerns. Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics and Jamovi. The analysis began with the assessment of the psychometric properties of the scales through Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the three scales, as well as reliability analysis, followed by descriptive statistics which included One-Way ANOVAS to verify differences among groups, and the final phase was hypothesis testing.

Results

Descriptive analysis

The analysis of sociodemographic variables revealed that AWO showed statistically significant differences between genders ($F = 4.18, p < .05$), suggesting that women present higher AWO ($M = 3.48; SD = .70$) than men ($M = 3.32; SD = .68$). However, contrary to our expectations, no

significant differences were found across age groups ($p = 0.118$) or levels of academic habilitation ($p = 0.862$).

Regarding POQ, no statistically significant differences were found between genders or educational levels. However, significant differences were identified between generations ($p < .01$), with Generation Z reporting higher POQ ($M = 3.05$, $SD = .91$) than Generation X ($M = 2.64$, $SD = .78$), as shown by the Scheffé post-hoc test ($p < .01$).

Regarding Flow, no statistically significant differences were found in absorption, work enjoyment, or intrinsic work motivation when analyzed across gender, generation, or educational level.

Descriptive statistics indicated that the highest mean was observed in the work enjoyment dimension ($M = 3.82$, $SD = .71$), suggesting that participants generally experience satisfaction in their work activities. In contrast, the lowest mean was observed for POQ ($M = 2.74$, $SD = .84$), indicating that feelings of being overqualified are not predominant in the sample.

Before testing the hypotheses, the prevalence of associations between variables was examined using Pearson correlation coefficients. The correlation matrix (Table 1) revealed significant relationships among the studied variables.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and correlations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. POQ	2.79	.83	1				
2. AWO	3.39	.69	.24**	1			
3. Flow_Absorption	3.41	.62	-.71**	.03	1		
4. Flow_WEnjoyment	3.82	.71	-.29**	-.14*	.33*	1	
5. Flow_IntrinsicWMot	3.14	.74	-.27**	-.13*	.31**	.72**	1

Note. **The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level; *The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

AWO showed a positive and significant weak correlation with POQ ($r = .24$, $p < .01$), suggesting that workers who perceive themselves as more overqualified tend to exhibit higher levels of anti-work orientation. In contrast, AWO was negatively correlated with the flow dimensions, particularly with work enjoyment ($r = -.14$, $p < .05$) and intrinsic work motivation ($r = -.13$, $p < .05$). Although these relationships were weak, they indicate that higher levels of AWO are associated with lower levels of enjoyment and intrinsic work motivation during work activities. Additionally, POQ showed significant negative correlations with all flow dimensions, with the strongest associations observed for work enjoyment ($r = -.29$, $p < .01$) and intrinsic work motivation ($r = -.27$, $p < .01$), suggesting that individuals who perceive themselves as overqualified tend to experience less enjoyment and motivation in their tasks.

Hypothesis testing

H1: Perceived overqualification is negatively related to flow levels at work. The simple linear regression analyses conducted between POQ and each of the three flow dimensions revealed a negative and significant predictive effect across all dimensions: absorption ($\beta = -.13$, $p < .01$; $R^2 = 0.029$), work enjoyment ($\beta = -.25$, $p < .01$; $R^2 = 0.083$), and intrinsic work motivation ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .01$; $R^2 = 0.074$), thereby confirming the stated hypothesis. Overall, work enjoyment appears to be the most affected dimension by POQ (8.3%). Globally, POQ explains approximately 18.6% of the combined variance across the three flow dimensions.

H2: Anti-work orientation mediates the relationship between perceived overqualification and flow. To test the mediation effect, the procedure proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) was followed. The first step requires that the predictor variable significantly affect the outcome variable, which was confirmed in H1. For the second and third steps, linear regressions were performed. The second step verified that the predictor variable significantly predicts the mediator, which was also confirmed ($\beta = .29, p < .01$). The third step assessed whether the mediator significantly predicts the outcome variable, which was confirmed for the work enjoyment and intrinsic work motivation dimensions (respectively, $\beta = -0.15, p < .01$; $\beta = -0.14, p < .05$). Although these results revealed significant relationships between the predictor, mediator, and outcome variables, thus meeting the classical criteria proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), the indirect effect obtained through bootstrap analysis was not statistically significant: $\beta = -0.01, p = .198$ for work enjoyment and $\beta = -0.01, p = .269$ for intrinsic work motivation. Therefore, the results do not provide empirical evidence supporting a mediation effect, and H2 is not supported.

Discussion and conclusion

The goal of this study was to evaluate the relationship between workers' perceived overqualifications and flow and the mediating role of anti-work orientation. In addition, we sought to understand if there were any differences across groups, specifically regarding AWO, as little is known regarding this new phenomenon. Thus, considering the associations between variables, a positive correlation was found between POQ and AWO, indicating that workers who perceived themselves as overqualified also reported a more negative stance toward work. This raises questions about the impact of the match between skills and job demands on motivation and professional engagement. Furthermore, the negative association between AWO and flow dimensions – namely work enjoyment and intrinsic work motivation – suggests that a more skeptical or demotivated view of work may compromise individuals' ability to fully engage in their tasks. The fact that POQ was negatively correlated with all flow dimensions reinforces the idea that a mismatch between qualifications and job requirements may reduce enjoyment and motivation at work, suggesting that organisations that fail to provide appropriately challenging tasks may be undermining employee well-being and performance.

Given these results, it becomes relevant to further explore whether AWO may play a role in the relationship between POQ and flow at work. The associations observed suggest that individuals who feel they possess more skills, qualifications, or professional experience than their tasks require may also report more critical attitudes toward work. At the same time, perceived overqualification was negatively associated with workers' flow experiences, namely immersion and satisfaction in work activities.

However, although the preliminary results suggested significant relationships between POQ, AWO, and flow, the inclusion of AWO as a mediating variable did not support a significant indirect effect. Thus, although workers who perceived themselves as overqualified also reported higher levels of anti-work orientation and lower levels of flow, the findings do not allow us to conclude that anti-work orientation mediates the relationship between perceived overqualification and flow.

As an additional exploratory goal, we also examined differences between groups. Although no generational differences were found regarding AWO, a relevant finding in the analysis concerns generational differences in perceived overqualification, with Generation Z reporting higher levels than Generation X. These results suggest that younger workers may feel more misaligned with their qualifications and job roles. According to a study by Hays (2019, cited in Human Resources Portugal, 2023), Generation Z is considered the most highly educated generation to date. In

contrast, Generation X shows a lower proportion of individuals with advanced academic qualifications. In addition, young members of Generation Z face various challenges in labour market integration, often encountering precarious employment conditions such as temporary contracts and low wages. These findings should be interpreted cautiously, as the analyses concerning generational differences were exploratory in nature. Nevertheless, this mismatch between high qualifications and available job opportunities may lead to a stronger perception of overqualification among Generation Z (Hays, 2019, cited in Human Resources Portugal, 2023), which may be associated with stronger anti-work attitudes. These attitudes may reflect broader changes in how younger generations perceive the role of work, particularly regarding work-life balance, social inequalities, and expectations concerning personal fulfillment.

Still focusing on AWO, significant gender differences were found, with women reporting higher levels compared to men. This result may be associated with structural and social factors that shape women's labor market experiences. Despite progress, gender inequalities persist in professional settings. As reported by the International Labour Organization (DGERT, 2025), women continue to face barriers in career progression and remain underrepresented in leadership positions, accounting for only 30% of such roles. Furthermore, women are overrepresented in low-income sectors and face wage disparities (PORDATA, 2023), along with unequal distribution of family responsibilities (McIntosh et al., 2012), all of which significantly influence how they perceive work. Although no statistically significant gender differences were found regarding POQ, these findings should be interpreted cautiously, as previous literature suggests that men and women may experience labour market inequalities differently. For women, this perception may be shaped by persistent gender discrimination, caregiving burdens, and limited access to leadership roles (de Oliveira et al., 2020; de Rezende et al., 2014). These constraints may lead many women to adjust their expectations and professional aspirations, contributing to a lower perceived sense of overqualification. Thus, perceptions of overqualification among women may be shaped by structural barriers that limit the full use of their academic and professional qualifications. In this sense, the results may reflect not a true parity of experience between genders, but rather asymmetrically distributed opportunities.

Regarding flow, the absence of significant differences across age, gender, and academic level in absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic work motivation may be explained by the fact that flow is more strongly associated with individual and contextual factors than with demographic characteristics. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), flow arises from a perceived balance between task challenges and individual skills, emerging primarily from person-environment interaction rather than sociodemographic variables. Intrinsic work motivation, a core component of flow, depends on factors such as task interest, perceived challenge, and sense of control (Deci & Ryan, 1985), reinforcing the idea that situational elements outweigh personal characteristics such as age, gender, or education. In this sense, workplace factors such as organisational support, job autonomy, and favorable working conditions are crucial for fostering flow states (Bakker, 2008; Salanova et al., 2006). Thus, the lack of significant differences in flow dimensions across demographic groups observed in this study was, to some extent, expected, consistent with the literature presented.

Theoretical and practical implications

These findings reinforce previous evidence on the negative effects of POQ on work experience, particularly regarding satisfaction, motivation, and engagement (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021; Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013). The associations observed between perceived overqualification, AWO, and flow suggest potentially relevant psychological dynamics that traditional approaches to people management. When POQ is subjectively interpreted as a form of devaluation or mismatch, workers

may become more likely to develop anti-work attitudes characterized by questioning the centrality and meaning of work. Higher levels of anti-work orientation may also be associated with lower levels of flow at work.

This dynamic calls for more than structural adjustments. It is not sufficient to simply redesign roles or assign more demanding tasks. It is essential to address the motivational and symbolic dimensions of work by promoting meaning, purpose, and recognition. Additionally, the study highlights the significance of generation-sensitive policies, particularly for Generation Z. This group strongly values autonomy, work-life balance, and authenticity in the workplace – often above financial rewards (Lašáková et al., 2023). Demanding constant availability or promoting workaholic cultures may be counterproductive. Instead, flexibility, purpose, and opportunities for personal development may be more effective in fostering performance and flow (Silva, 2024). Gender differences in AWO further suggest that workplaces still reflect significant inequalities. Measures such as equal opportunity distribution, stereotype reduction, and family support should therefore be seen not only as ethical imperatives but also as foundational conditions for reducing AWO and enhancing engagement (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015).

Limitations and future research

This study relied on self-report scales, which involve subjective perceptions and may introduce response bias, including social desirability effects. Although common in organizational research, this approach limits the ability to fully ensure accuracy in participants' responses. Also, the cross-sectional design limits the possibility of establishing causal relationships among the variables studied. Furthermore, all variables were measured using self-report questionnaires, which may increase the risk of common method bias.

Additionally, the quantitative design may oversimplify complex psychological processes by relying primarily on structured numerical data, potentially overlooking more nuanced or contextual elements. Future research could benefit from qualitative approaches to complement these findings. Although results indicate that both perceived overqualification and anti-work orientation are associated with lower flow levels, the relationship appears more complex than initially expected. No significant mediating effect of AWO was found, suggesting that deep task engagement may not necessarily be prevented by critical attitudes toward work.

Future research could explore how AWO coexists with high flow in specific dimensions through coping strategies. As defined by Lazarus and Folkman's coping theory (1984, cited in Pinheiro et al., 2003), coping involves constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage demands perceived as exceeding personal resources. It would be particularly relevant to examine whether individuals with perceived overqualification and anti-work orientation may redefine professional goals, find alternative meaning in tasks, or invest in external sources of fulfillment (e.g., personal projects, continuous learning, or volunteering), thereby maintaining deep engagement at work despite reduced overall satisfaction. Understanding these processes would be essential not only to clarify the relationship between POQ, AWO, and flow, but also to design organisational interventions that support well-being and productivity among workers who maintain critical views of traditional work structures. In an increasingly fragmented, post-pandemic labor environment shaped by new generational values, work relationships are no longer defined solely by adherence or rejection, but by more complex and dynamic forms of engagement. Recognizing this ambivalence – and the mechanisms that allow individuals to transform misalignment or dissatisfaction into functional episodes of flow – may open pathways for more adaptive policies focused on well-being, retention, and performance.

Declaration of conflicting of interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Informed consent

All participants provided informed consent to participate and the experiments were both conducted in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors contribution

Conceptualization: FC, DG, AS, FG. Methodology: FC, DG, AS, FG; Formal analysis: FC, DG, AS, FG; Data collection: FC, FG; Writing – Original draft: FC, DG, AS, FG; Writing – Review and editing: DG, AS.

All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Demasiado qualificado para entrar em *flow*? O papel da orientação anti-trabalho na relação entre a sobrequalificação e o *flow*

Resumo: O estado de *flow* é definido como um estado psicológico de profunda imersão e pleno envolvimento nas tarefas, que compreende três dimensões – absorção, prazer no trabalho e motivação intrínseca para o trabalho – e tem sido associado a elevados níveis de bem-estar no local de trabalho. No entanto, fatores como a percepção de sobrequalificação podem prejudicar esta experiência positiva. O presente estudo teve como objetivo investigar se a percepção de sobrequalificação estava negativamente associada ao estado de *flow* no trabalho e se esta relação era mediada pela orientação anti-trabalho, que reflete atitudes negativas em relação ao trabalho. O estudo incluiu 339 trabalhadores de diferentes gerações e seguiu uma abordagem quantitativa. Os resultados revelaram uma associação negativa significativa entre a percepção de sobrequalificação e o estado de *flow*, bem como uma associação positiva e significativa entre a percepção de sobrequalificação e a orientação anti-trabalho. Embora os resultados também tenham sugerido que a orientação anti-trabalho estava negativamente associada às dimensões do prazer no trabalho e da motivação intrínseca para o trabalho do estado de *flow*, o papel mediador da orientação anti-trabalho não foi confirmado. Foram também exploradas algumas diferenças entre os grupos, principalmente as geracionais. Os resultados contribuem para uma compreensão mais profunda da influência da percepção de sobrequalificação e da orientação anti-trabalho na experiência de *flow*, uma relação pouco explorada na literatura.

Palavras-chave: Sobrequalificação percebida, *Flow*, Orientação anti-trabalho.

Submitted: 19/05/2026

Accepted: 29/05/2026

Published: 28/09/2026