

Do You Overwork? More production, but at what cost?

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Work/Life Columnist

When was the last time you arrived home from your job full of energy and with a sense of accomplishment that you completed your work for the day? Or when did you last return from your vacation without having to log extra work hours to catch up on e-mails? If you are tethered to your Blackberry or Treo, have you ever turned off the handheld beeping machine? Yes, off— as in silenced.

Over the past 25 years, jobs have become more demanding of workers' time. The average dual-earner couple works a combined 82 hours per week today, compared to 70 hours two and a half decades ago. Unlike in years past, technology blurs the lines between work and non-work times, and employees complain of steady job interruptions preventing them from adequately focusing on their work. Yet people are mired in a culture of instant responses — people expect an immediate reply to their e-mail, text or voicemail message.

Statistics aside, many workers would agree that they work hard. Yet it seems that there is little reward for this labor. Analyses conducted by the Economic Policy Institute illustrate that despite U.S. workers' efforts, wages are declining. Productivity has increased by 16.6 percent between 2000 and 2005. Yet, median income for U.S. workers was 2.7 percent lower in 2005 than it was in 2000. We are producing more, but earning less.

One in three U.S. employees is chronically overworked, according to a study conducted by the Families and Work Institute in New York City. Overwork is generally defined as negative outcomes that occur when individuals are required to work more hours than they want to work. Overwork has become a U.S. trend, in part, as a consequence of cutbacks and layoffs.

As a researcher who studies the effects of workplace practices on employees' well-being and organizational outcomes, when I review such statistics, I generally ask what impact this matter has on workers, their families and employers. Not surprisingly, heavy workloads and long working hours increase employee stress levels, burnout and health care costs. These same job attributes lower employee productivity, reduce employees' on-the-job aspirations and leave less time for family, friends, exercise and volunteer activities.

When "overwork" strikes, time reserved for exercise, family and friends gets lost. Ironically, these are the exact activities that replenish energy and reduce symptoms associated with stress.

While labor economists may be celebrating a 16.6 percent increase in productivity, employees are suffering — they earn less, are overworked and are stressed out. This begs the question, what impact do these trends have on U.S. employers? The American Institute of Stress estimates that U.S. companies lost an estimated \$300 billion in 2001 from costs associated with absenteeism, turnover, poor morale, and insurance fees related to job stress. Other effects of overwork and stress include: making mistakes, lost productivity, and an increase in employee complaints of acute and chronic health problems.

What's a company to do? The causes of chronic overwork are complex and vary across organizations. As such, there is not a one-size-fits-all solution to reduce overwork and its ill effects. Nonetheless, the first step to reducing workloads is to understand what factors are causing employees to overwork. Once causes are identified, together employers and employees can develop solutions that are a win-win for all. Examples of workplace practices that may result in overwork include:

- Conflicting demands from employers/ managers
- Insufficient training, guidance and support from employers/managers
- Too many additional responsibilities
- Worker isolation and lack of contact with co-workers
- Downloading of management responsibilities onto workers
- No replacement of workers who are away sick or on holidays
- Lower worker-to-client ratios and staff cutbacks
- Staff not being replaced upon retirement
- Loss of control over how the job is done
- Missing breaks, working through lunches

What is an employee to do? In the short-term, stress management techniques are critical. Exercise and meditation are two proven ways to reduce stress. Carve out time to take your lunch break, if possible walk during lunch or at least eat lunch away from your desk or work site. Assess your situation: does your job really require you to work long hours, or is it your personality that dictates long work hours? If after some consideration you discover it is the latter, take time to reflect on circumstances and make changes according. If overwork is a chronic condition of your job, then enlist your employer or manager in a discussion about your observations. As previously noted, reducing the ill effects of chronic overwork on employees and employers requires a comprehensive assessment of work processes and a collaborative solution with representation from management, supervisors and employees.

Regardless of the root cause of overwork, taking a vacation from work provides perspective on the situation. Summer is fast approaching. Make a plan to get away from your job for a break. If at all possible, wean yourself away from work e-mail, text messages and phone calls while you are not on the clock. To truly relax, full separation from the demands of work is necessary.

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