

Work Force Singing a New Kind of Blues

Knowledge-based Employees are Dangerously Overworked and Managers Must Find New Strategies to Make Their Environment Healthy

**By
Graham Lowe**

The old industrial era was stressful for workers. Factories churning out endless consumer products were built around assembly line jobs, which were physically taxing and mind-numbingly boring.

In today's global knowledge economy, robots or workers in developing countries do most of the factory work. The "blue-collar blues," as factory worker dissatisfaction was called in the sixties and seventies, no longer is a major threat to productivity.

However, the blue-collar blues has been replaced by an even louder chorus: knowledge workers' lament about the stresses of overwork.

Business and political leaders agree that knowledge, and people's ability to develop and use it, gives companies and countries their economic edge. Yet, there has been little recognition that a healthy work environment is essential to support knowledge-based work. More than ever, economic success depends on creating healthy workplaces.

Stress research shows that a healthy job is mentally challenging, skilled and enables decision-making. Assembly-line jobs were stressful because they lacked these features; knowledge-based jobs should be healthy because they provide all this.

Yet, the problem for growing numbers of knowledge workers – professionals, managers, administrators and technicians – is that there's too much of a good thing. Their workloads and performance expectations are out of control. Rising unemployment in the 1990s fuelled predictions of "the end of work." But the opposite happened. Many knowledge workers entered the new millennium feeling they had more work than they could handle.

A stressful culture of overwork has emerged from constant organizational change, dependence on information technology and the demands of a non-stop global economy. Today's lean workplace has rewritten the employment contract: Nothing less than 110-per-cent effort is good enough.

This work intensification most directly affects knowledge workers who drive the postindustrial economy.

While about one in eight workers log 50 or more hours weekly, according to Statistics Canada, close to two in five senior managers work these long hours. A national survey by Canadian Policy Research Networks and Ekos Research Associates found that at least one in five managers and professionals often or always had difficulty keeping up with their workload. Furthermore, knowledge workers were more likely than others to report that their job is very stressful.

These trends are not uniquely Canadian. U.S. scholar Richard Florida argues that the “creative class” of knowledge workers, comprising 30 per cent of the U.S. work force, is more likely than other groups of workers to feel rushed, time-impooverished and stressed. Enjoying flexibility in work schedules and locations unheard of in the industrial era comes at a price. Because the creative class greatly values their time, they are always wired into work. In Britain, findings from the 2001 skills survey, conducted by a research team at the universities of Oxford and Warwick, discovered rising job skills – an essential ingredient of a knowledge economy – were directly associated with increased employee stress.

My work with many private and public sector knowledge-based organizations across Canada shows that this work intensification is unsustainable. The resulting stress is not only unhealthy for employees; it also is dysfunctional for organizations.

Consider the following: A manager of a professional unit discovered in a succession planning meeting that nobody on the team wanted her job because it’s seen as guaranteed burnout. In another firm that offers generous vacation days, key managers and professionals are not expected to take these – raising concerns about scaring off potential recruits. When a senior manager in another organization spoke out about his desire for a healthier work-life balance, this became a career-limiting move and quickly stifled discussions about solutions. A public sector organization employing mainly professionals saw prescription drug benefit costs jump – especially for antidepressants, sedatives and related medications that treat symptoms of stress – during a period of budget cuts and rising workloads.

At numerous conferences and workshops, a major issue raised by professionals and managers is how high-pressure workplaces discourage innovation – finding new and better ways to do things – simply because there is so little time for reflection and shared learning. Research by Statistics Canada makes a similar point: Nationally, the major reason workers do not participate in job-related training is a lack of time. Furthermore, time pressures also inhibit coaching and mentoring, activities that organizations will increasingly rely on to transfer their intellectual capital to new employees.

A stress-impaired work force means higher employer and public health care costs. To understand how this happens, we need to look beyond the usual indicators of a healthy workplace, such as absenteeism. For example, in two service organizations I surveyed, stressed-out professionals had very low rates of absenteeism. That’s because they came to work even when ill. This “presenteeism” problem could undermine productivity in knowledge-based organizations.

Workers show up, but don't fully function. If it's the flu or a cold that ails them, the health of an entire work group will be at risk. The cumulative impact of presenteeism is rising long-term disability claims and serious talent wastage.

We've known for years that psychologically healthy jobs increase life expectancy, reduce the chances of depression or exhaustion and reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.

More research will shed light on how healthy jobs and workplaces also contribute to knowledge creation and use. Still, we know enough to take action.

As a start, employers should heed the advice of Peter Drucker, perhaps the leading management thinker today.

Mr. Drucker articulates the growing realization that knowledge workers must be treated as assets. He calls for a new approach to people management that enables continuous innovation, learning and teaching throughout the workday.

As part of this new approach, employers can tap knowledge workers' creativity by directly involving them in diagnosing stress-related problems in their workplace. Strategies for reducing the intensity of work must provide breathing space for imagination to flourish:

- Cut out reports that have no real value to the organization.
- Be serious about priority setting for projects and tasks.
- Reward managers who support employees to achieve their personal and career needs.
- Most of all, openly discuss what's right about the work environment and what needs fixing.

For years, we thought that good health arose from a successful economy. But we had it backward: Prosperity depends on a healthy work force. So we must create truly healthy organizations that deliver the results desired by managers, investors and employees. This winning formula closely links innovation, financial success and employee well being.

Graham Lowe is a work sociologist at the University of Alberta and a research associate with Canadian Policy Research Networks. This article is based on his address to be given Monday to the Health, Work & Wellness Conference 2002, in Lake Louise, Alta.