

## Stressed out in the space - time continuum

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*There is mounting evidence that those employed in work are spending longer hours in the workplace and perhaps working harder, not necessarily smarter with significant implications for health, wellbeing and productivity. This trend seems likely to continue in the short term as business focuses on cost reduction and asset management. What role can the design and management of the modern workplaces play in supporting those who use them?*

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## **Overworked - who me?**

Why do more Australians than ever indicate they are unhappy at work?

Extended hours of work seems to be one of the factors contributing to this sense of unhappiness at work. Recent Australian research has identified one of the major reasons for this sense of unhappiness is that people feel they have to work too hard (1). But many people also think that the longer the hours they work the better it is. As a consequence, the average working week in Australia had continued to increase to 43.4 hours by the late 1990's (2). This tendency to work longer hours has effectively reversed all of the gains in achieving a shorter working week made in the post war years. About a third of full time employees according to the research worked around 49 hours per week. The evidence suggests this trend to longer working hours is continuing (3).

Benjamin Hunnicutt, a historian at the University of Iowa in the US has concluded that work has become the "new religion" and people are now working longer hours to maintain their purchasing power (4). Time he says is increasingly absorbed by the workplace. In the US, the shorter working week is now considered to be a "negative leading economic indicator". Work is now viewed as an end in itself, not a means to an end. This change in attitude has led to higher levels of consumption as opposed to higher levels of freedom from necessity. Expanding economies it would appear are built on expanding need, expanding consumption *and* expanding work.

However US statistics also suggest that changes in working patterns may not be evenly distributed across the whole spectrum of the working population. Hours for unskilled workers are actually falling while for professionals they are increasing. This has major implications for the health and wellbeing of those workers largely confined to the office environment. In the US at least it would appear "the working class has more leisure and the leisure class more work" (5).

A work culture of longer working hours is emerging in Australia too. Researchers at the Griffith University found the behaviour of some workers influences the behaviour of others and despite individuals having more say over the amount of time they work, they still choose to work longer hours (6). "The culture of longer hours is something that is more complex than simply the employers telling workers they have to work long hours against their will. It's a culture that has been bought into by working people" say the researchers. The good news for employers could be that for a variety of reasons employees may actually be internalising their corporation's business objectives. Interestingly surveys in the US also indicate that people tend to routinely overestimate the time they spend at work and over the years, the size of these overestimates has increased as well.

These practices combined, tend to reinforce the trend to longer working hours, potentially with negative consequences for human health outcomes as well.

## **Blurring the Boundaries**

For some, the workplace does provide a sense of community because home is defined by increasingly dysfunctional relationships. Faced with this emerging reality some corporations have sought to fulfil the physical, psychological and emotional needs of their employees. One outward expression of this desire has been the rise in popularity of the corporate campus; a workplace paradise capable of meeting employee needs as diverse as childcare to delivered in meal services. One US company went so far as providing chilled fertility drugs to a female employee, in her office, calculating every dollar invested yielded \$1.75 gained in productivity!

However, in their desire to continuously improve worker productivity, some corporations are chipping away at the boundaries that separate work community from external community, calling for work-life balance to be replaced with work-life integration. Employees it seems, should be able to move "seamlessly" between on the job and off the job activities. The aim may not be to decrease employees' workload of but to allow them to choose to overwork in

the best possible conditions, a bit like multitasking, 24X7, all aided by ubiquitous technology. Some workplaces are even being set up so people never have to go home.

The problem here is that this blurring of boundaries between work and private life can have disastrous consequences for employees, if the company's fortunes do eventually falter. Employees can simultaneously lose their job, family and sense of community as well. The combined effects of extended hours of work, loss of control and job insecurity are often being glossed over by a new corporate speak that emphasises personal empowerment, fulfilment and individual choice.

### **Free Time**

Historically "free time" was seen an essential part of a worker's life, and vital to the preservation of subcultures and communities.

"Freed from economic necessity for part of the day, ordinary people envisioned a new kind of liberty; a new freedom that would lead to the creation of democratic culture, vibrant worker communities, life long learning for everyone, widespread improvement in physical health, spiritual growth" (4). Do these words written in the 1930's have a familiar ring to them today?

In the last 50 years, underlying beliefs about the need to reduce working hours have been replaced with a new "culture of work", a desire to find new work to replace work taken over by machines and computers. This has reversed the relationship between free time and working time.

But as Birch and Paul have indicated, the result of extended working hours is not necessarily better productivity or profits, but hidden costs associated with work related stress which is well and truly working its way up the corporate hierarchy. The short-term workplace impacts are poor morale, motivation, absenteeism and lower productivity. All of these outcomes have cost implications for employers. In 1999, stress related disorders in Australia added to direct management costs estimated at 5% of GDP, or \$20Bn per annum (1, Page 82). Further, based on a sample of workplaces with more than 20 employees, stress was the second most frequently reported disability for all employees, with office based workers over represented. Women reported susceptibility to stress related disabilities at a rate 50% higher than men (1 quoting from Moorehead et al, Changes at Work, 1997, Page 125).

Looking to the future, Bruce Moore, a Partner at Mallesons Stephen Jaques in Melbourne believes employers are also potentially liable for costs under statutory and common law if they ignore the consequences of stress on their employees. Moore says that stress "is seen as serious and legitimate workplace concern which may create a responsibility on the part of employers to develop adequate mechanisms for preventing and dealing with it". "Longer hours, continuous change and the uncertainty of employment can affect particular people", Moore says. (7)

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Stress that leads to strain causes changes in brain chemistry, which ultimately imperils the body's immune system. Workplace stress is produced when work is organised or designed in ways that ignore or devalue basic human needs, particularly those related to health outcomes and wellbeing. Public Works and Government Services in Canada has described a general model of influences on wellness, meaning self reported health status, in the workplace (8). The model demonstrates how workplace stress and home stress, feed off and reinforce each other, affecting wellness by defeating the employees' sense of control over their work, making it more difficult to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Both factors reduce the motivation to pursue and maintain positive health practices.

Corporate support programs such as stress management, exercise and other health related activities that focus on changing behaviour or placing responsibility on employees, have their place, but on their own are not enough. Serious attempts to reduce stress and improve

performance require a dual focus. Attention to work system design and management and the characteristics of the physical workplace is also critical in reducing stress, delivering better health outcomes and improving productivity (9).

## **Wellness, Workplace Design and Management**

A recent Fortune 500 survey (5) identified "sense of purpose, inspiring leadership and knockout facilities" as key criteria in attracting employees to a company. Interestingly, these attributes mirror the three defining characteristics of a cult; devotion, charismatic leadership and separation from community.

If work really is the new religion, and knockout facilities a key corporate deliverable, what are the implications for those involved in workplace design and management?

Some workplace design and management factors carry higher risks than others. Workplaces where employees have too much to do, for too long with constant imposed deadlines but limited ability to control their work environment have been shown to be associated with significantly higher rates of heart and cardiovascular problems, anxiety, depression, alcohol or prescription drug abuse, low morale and disempowerment. Anxiety, depression and conflict related problems also increase when employees believe they have to consistently expend high amounts of mental and physical energy to achieve organisation goals, yet feel they receive inadequate financial compensation, acknowledgement or status (7,10).

While in many workplaces, the level of demand, effort required and reward may simply be determined by competitive market conditions, these factors have a powerful influence on the satisfaction, stress and ultimately health of employees.

Attention to work system design can still have beneficial impacts, because control and reward in the modern working environment are now closely connected. For many employees, control is now the reward they seek. The satisfaction that comes from having control over the working environment or the way work is done, in other words "work practices" that deliver the results, can have a major impact on both stress reduction and productivity improvement. For some, control of the working environment generally is a status symbol, having replaced control of the workspace specifically in the form of a large or enclosed office.

## **Out of Control**

Workplace stress is clearly affected by a person's inability to control their working environment, which in turn is determined by worksystem design. The Mayo Clinic concluded that ordinary workplace activity, such as constantly ringing telephones, increased background noise, equipment errors and team conflict, leads to stress that over time contributes to physical and emotional illness (11). "Greater attention to the design of work environments may be one important way to reduce inequalities in health" says Professor Michael Marmot, International Centre for Health and Society, Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, UCL, London, UK (12). The good news is that control is the key to achieving the triple whammy! Enabling employees to exercise more control over their environmental conditions can have a positive impact on satisfaction and productivity, and save money by reducing energy costs and greenhouse gas emissions into the natural environment as well.(13)

At the detailed design level, work environments that offer higher levels of diversity in space types tend to provide occupants with choice and flexibility. This might fuel creativity and at the same time help reduce stress levels. However flexibility and choice have become associated with work that demands a high level of mental agility and the ability to multitask or to be multi skilled. This kind of work may have its own negative consequences for stress and wellbeing.

These workplace issues can be assessed using performance tools like **probeg** in the design and management process.

## **Beyond the boundaries of choice**

In his ground breaking work McGill University Professor Henry Mintzberg (14) found that half of manager's activities had a time span of less than nine minutes, and only 10% of tasks more than an hour. Since then the push for a wider range of employees to multitask has increased dramatically as the management drive for continuous performance improvement has seen jobs consolidated or reassigned to just one person. Now the average time spent on an office task is just three minutes, and only two minutes, when using a technology device like phone or email (15).

How far can these boundaries of flexibility and choice be extended before they begin to have negative consequences?

The answer might lie in a recent study which established that we may be vastly underestimating the costs of multi tasking (16). Meyer and his colleagues found that despite the demands of modern work, some of the limitations of the human brain just cannot be escaped. Their mounting evidence shows a lot of alternating between activities can diminish not enhance productivity. The research indicates that the brain goes through a kind of "warm - up" whenever an individual begins a new task. This can take up to ten minutes. Once warmed up a person can work productively, but minor distractions have the potential to derail this flow, meaning the brain needs to go through this warm -up cycle again. Multi tasking, too much meaningless choice, open workspaces and large workgroups can contribute to increased stress and decrease not enhance productivity.

Neurologist Richard Restak (17) also believes that our brains may not necessarily be wired for this multitasking working life. He argues that too much divided attention effectively induces Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and that sensory overload explains a lot of ill health conditions; chronic fatigue, loss of sexual desire and inability to sleep for example.

## **In Conclusion**

There is mounting evidence that those employed in work are spending longer hours in the workplace and perhaps working harder, not necessarily smarter. This trend is likely to continue in the short term as business increasingly focusses on cost reduction and asset management. The result is higher stress which can have a major negative impact on health, wellbeing and productivity. While there are a multitude of factors both within and external to the organisation that affect employee stress levels, workplace design and management can play a positive role.

Spatial solutions which increase privacy or allow access to solitude, are as important as providing opportunities for socialisation. Less structured social interaction seems to be the "in-fashion" design response to an employee's need for down time to "reboot". However this is quite different to designing an integrated work system that incorporate more sustainable work practices such as "creative meandering". Organisations that recognise the intrinsic value of employees above their usefulness find this contribution to the employees perception of "quality of life" is repayed through increased employee satisfaction. Increased satisfaction can be correlated to increased efficiency, creativity and productivity.

Settings that are more natural also have the potential to lower stress and improve work productivity, but the linkages are not as straightforward as would initially appear.

Above all, a key challenge lies in being able to resist the ubiquitous nature of information technology to the extent that it does not impose on the working environment a singular corporate consciousness or intelligence that leaves us simply chasing our tails in the quest for more "quality time".

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