

Are Your Harried Employees Enjoying Life or Headed to the Doctor's Office?



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As companies strive to do more with fewer employees, efficiency goes up and employees' quality of life goes down. Or does it? A recent Accenture survey of full-time workers in the United States revealed that while some employees experience higher levels of stress as a result of an increased workload, an equal number experience no stress or even enjoy an improved quality of life. And while these employees differ vastly from each other in many respects, they have one thing in common: Few of them look to the human resources department as a source of help or encouragement when they find their stress levels rising.

The implications of these findings for companies pursuing high performance are significant. In our ongoing research, Accenture has found that high-performance businesses have highly engaged and productive employees, as well as a unique performance anatomy that enables an organization to out-execute its competition over time. The performance anatomy is rooted in the workforce, so if a large portion of a company's employee base is too stressed out to be engaged or productive, the company's ability to achieve high performance could be greatly compromised.

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Most are working harder, but some suffer more than others.

According to the Society for Human Resource Management, one of the top HR trends is "work intensification": Employers trying to increase productivity with fewer employees and resources.¹ It should not come as a surprise, then, that nearly two-thirds of 1,029 full-time employees surveyed by Accenture in February 2006 reported an increased workload during the past 12 to 24 months.

When asked what had led to their increased workloads, respondents listed a variety of causes: companies' failure to add more staff to support growth (cited by 50 percent of respondents), strategic or directional changes in the company (45 percent), or a reorganization (40 percent). Interestingly, these responses echo those of participants in another Accenture survey, middle managers in the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain and Australia.

A large percentage of the workers surveyed in that study had negative opinions about various aspects of their companies, including how the organizations are managed, employee compensation, work/life balance and career options.

However, while there seems to be a clear consensus from survey respondents that workloads are growing, the impact of this on employees is anything but uniform. In fact, while half of the respondents said their workload is having a negative impact on them and adding stress to their personal lives, one-quarter reported no effect, and another quarter reported that the extra work actually had had a positive impact. Indeed, our study showed that what was an overwhelming workload for one person was "no big deal" for somebody else right down the hall.



Finding the sources of stress.

Intrigued by this finding, we returned to the survey data for a closer look. We found that this puzzling difference was not based on age or gender. For example, while respondents in the 45- to 54-year-old bracket were the most likely of any age group (71 percent) to report an increased workload, they were no more or less likely than average to report a negative impact or increased stress resulting from that workload. Similarly, women were only slightly more likely than men to report having had a negative impact from their increased workload (53 percent v. 46 percent).

However, employees' income brackets held some promising clues. For example, we found that respondents with annual household incomes between \$35,000 and \$50,000 appeared to be feeling more pain from their increased workloads. More specifically, 72 percent of this group (compared with 49 percent of all respondents having had an increase in job duties) reported their

workload was having a negative impact on them and adding stress to their lives.

When we looked at this group in more detail, we found additional insights. Namely, this group was more likely than those in other income segments to be affected by changes in corporate strategy or direction (66 percent), failure of the company to hire additional staff to support growth (66 percent), reorganization (54 percent), changes in senior leadership (51 percent) and the departure of colleagues who weren't replaced (41 percent). In other words, these employees' workload increases came from things beyond their control. Importantly, this group was also among the least likely to have an increase in workload because of a positive development: just 27 percent said they were doing more at work because of a promotion and the accompanying new responsibilities (compared with 41 percent of

respondents earning less than \$25,000 a year and 49 percent of those making between \$25,000 and \$35,000).

Indeed, the key difference between those that relished their additional work and those that felt buried appears to be the circumstances surrounding the increase in work. More specifically, employees who had an increased workload brought on by forces outside of their control, such as a new boss or fired coworkers, tended to experience much greater levels of stress than those whose jobs expanded under more auspicious conditions such as promotions.

In fact, respondents between 18 and 24—who were much more likely than the sample average to have their increased workload result from a promotion (61 percent v. 33 percent)—were more likely than other groups to report that their increased workloads were having no impact on their personal lives (37 percent versus 25 percent of the overall sample).

While employees have developed many solutions to stress, few rely on HR or management for help.

Employees who were under stress felt the desire to find relief. In fact, among those who said their increased workload was increasing stress levels in their personal lives, nearly all (91 percent) said they would consider doing something about it. That "something" took a wide variety of forms, with some measures more drastic than others. For example, three-fourths said they might discuss the problem with family or friends, and 40 percent reported they were considering talking to their supervisor at work. At the other end of the continuum, just under one-third said they were thinking about leaving their jobs, and for nearly 30 percent the stress had become so intense that they were considering consulting a doctor.

The use of these stress-relief tactics varied significantly from group to group. For instance, those between 18 and 24 years of age were much more likely than the overall sample to consider talking with their family and friends about the negative impact of their workload increase (100 percent v. 75 percent) and much less likely to consider consulting a doctor (0 percent v. 29 percent). In the \$50,000 to \$75,000 group, 41 percent said they were considering consulting a doctor in response to stress from their increased workloads. And of the \$35,000 to \$50,000 group—those who are experiencing the most stress—less than one-third said they would consider talking about the issue with their boss or with the HR department.

This hesitance to take advantage of corporate resources was a pattern seen across these otherwise diverse groups. In fact, across the sample only one-fourth of respondents reported that they were considering approaching their company's HR department about the stress arising from their heavy workloads.

Management—not workload—is the key factor in generating stress.

In conclusion, the research implies that companies may have a significant—and perhaps growing—problem on their hands that if not dealt with effectively could threaten organizations' ability to achieve high performance. A high level of stress among employees could lead to a host of issues, including rising employee apathy and disengagement from the business, increased absenteeism, higher attrition rates, tepid productivity and, possibly, higher healthcare costs.

Indeed, the results of our survey are aligned with those of a landmark study on workplace stress conducted by the American Psychological Association recently. In this research, 62 percent of Americans said work has a significant impact on their stress levels, 54 percent of workers are concerned about health problems caused by stress, and one in four workers has taken a mental health day off from work to cope with stress.²

So what's a company to do? In today's business environment, lessening the workload is not exactly an option. Investors, competitors and customers alike are keeping the pressure on companies to perform, and for most organizations, that means boosting workforce productivity and holding down costs.

In Accenture's view, the alternative has two parts. The first part is addressing the workforce stress issue by providing employees with the appropriate tools and development opportunities that maximize their performance while enabling them to more effectively balance their job duties. This could include new knowledge management systems that give employees access to resources critical to doing their jobs at a higher level; flexible work arrangements that recognize employees' demands outside the office; training specifically tailored to addressing

their expanded responsibilities; or new career paths that give them a clearer picture of their opportunities for advancement and what it takes for them to capitalize on those opportunities.

The second part is dealing with the HR function image problem by more tightly linking HR professionals to the business so that they are more in tune with employees' needs. This may involve assigning HR professionals to work directly in individual functions or business units, tailoring HR services to specific workforces in accordance with their unique job demands, or creating new performance management capabilities that enable HR to offer incentives, measure and reward employees based on their new duties. In short, companies must understand that as workforces become more diverse in every way, the traditional "one size fits all" approach to HR services is no longer appropriate or relevant.

There is no doubt that in a knowledge economy, the workforce often spells the difference between mediocrity and market leadership. And for businesses pursuing high performance, "people are our most critical assets" must be much more than a slogan or a line in the mission statement. While stress certainly can never be eliminated in a job, smart companies take the steps necessary to mute the impact of stress whenever possible and foster the kind of positive, supportive working environment that makes the organization a beacon for superior talent.

1. SHRM Special Expertise Panels 2006 Trends Update
2. (APA Survey 2004, viewed at www.apa.org on 5/1/2006)

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