The Elephant in the Room

Like the proverbial “elephant in the room,” overwork is the troubling workplace reality that everyone knows is there, but no one dares mention because they don’t know how to deal with it.

No one questions that work hours and reported stress levels are increasing or that documented costs of stress and burnout are rising. Despite its huge organizational and personal costs, the problem of overwork is difficult to raise because of the common wisdom that long work hours are the price of success and increased productivity.

How can we even think about reducing workload when the economic environment — never mind job security — compels us all to keep our shoulders to the wheel?

The result is that, despite the human capital cost, employers are not doing a good job of addressing escalating workload. And they know it. Recently, WFD Consulting invited employers to rate themselves on a range of factors that drive organizational health and resilience. Respondents rated their organizations lowest on “addressing workload” (see graphic), with only one in ten saying their company was doing a good job.

Addressing Workload Through A Team Effectiveness Process

Though workload is largely an unaddressed issue, a number of companies are finding that they can indeed reduce workload and work stress — while maintaining or increasing productivity. These companies include IBM, Deloitte & Touche USA LLP, Texas Instruments and Marriott International. Using the Team Effectiveness Process™ developed by WFD, these companies have empowered work groups to get to the root of excessive workload and find practical solutions. The result is increased effectiveness for the team and greater job satisfaction and quality of life for the individual.

The Team Effectiveness Process™ is based on research about the causes of overwork. Teams are given on-line tools to help them identify precisely the practices, processes, and behaviors that contribute to inefficiency and excessive workload. They are then guided through a team problem-solving process to develop innovative solutions and action plans that deal with the priority issues for their team. The team manager is also provided with on-line monitoring tools and tips for sustaining the benefits over time.

Few organizations say they are doing well at managing workload and nearly half give their organizations a low rating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Low (1-4)</th>
<th>Middle (5-7)</th>
<th>High (8-10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managing Workload</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing Effective Managers</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving/ Openness to New Ideas</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust &amp; Inclusion</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>39%</td>
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Participants rated their mid-size and large, for-profit organizations on a scale from 1 (low) to 10 (high) on each factor. The responses from participants have been collapsed into ‘high’ (ratings from 8 to 10), ‘middle’ (ratings from 5 to 7), and ‘low’ (ratings from 1 to 4) and are displayed above.

Source: WFD Consulting
Corporate success stories in addressing overwork contain several common themes.

Harness the energy of teams. “There is a great deal that can be done to address workload at the team level—and the very process of coming together and defining what is in their power to control is a positive experience for team members,” says Diane Burrus who has implemented the Team Effectiveness Process™ in a wide variety of work situations. “Because team members work together to tackle workload issues that are causing them frustration and wasted effort, they are motivated to succeed. Armed with objective data, TEP enables workgroups to address issues that would be otherwise difficult to raise and to develop work innovations that save time and energy.”

But if teams are in such a time crunch, how will they find time to step back and evaluate their work? The answer, says Burrus, is a process that is streamlined and easy for managers to implement. In this way a small investment of time yields concrete results. For example, IBM uses on-line tools to guide managers through a work evaluation and action planning process with their teams. IBM has successfully implemented the process in every geography of the world, resulting in less time spent on administrative tasks and more profitable time spent with clients.

Root out low value and frustrating work. “The key is to go after low value work,” says Amy Richman, who has tracked the impact of the TEP on employees and businesses. “In our research we found that, across industries and at different levels within organizations, employees were reporting they spent about 20% of their time on low value or frustrating work that could be reduced or eliminated without negatively affecting business results.”

Through an on-line survey and facilitated discussion, teams can identify the areas of inefficiency and ineffectiveness that lead to excessive work-load. “It’s surprising,” says Richman, “how quickly consensus builds about where time is being wasted.” When Marriott hotel properties identified low value work, they were able to cut five hours from managers’ work weeks, without any negative effect on financial results, guest satisfaction or productivity metrics.

Maintain a dual focus. “The danger of any work redesign process,” says Burrus, “is that it becomes all about advantage to the company. There has to be something in it for the team members. Otherwise, change is difficult to sustain and you haven’t really affected stress, morale and burnout issues. The key to a sustainable plan is a dual focus that benefits both the company and the individual.”

At Texas Instruments, teams create their own “work-life effectiveness charter” as an integral part of workload management. Using an on-line assessment tool and a discussion guide, each team identifies ways to “affirm people’s right to have personal lives” while also meeting business goals. Team charters typically include such things as respecting each other’s time, communicating expectations clearly and early in a project, building personal commitments into project planning, evaluating others based on results, supporting each other in taking vacation and other time off, and avoiding unnecessary interruptions.

Far from undermining productivity, tackling workload produces results that are gratifying to managers, team members and customers. Deloitte used the team-based process with client engagement teams, resulting in greater team effectiveness, communication, morale, and satisfaction of both clients and team members. The leader of a team that had previously experienced high turnover and low morale, remarked on the turn-around. “My team was very pleased with the increased flexibility, work-life balance and enhanced effectiveness of the team in working together with their clients. In fact, many have indicated a desire to join this team again next year!”

Addresses Workload Has Tangible Results

Companies have monitored and evaluated the impact of a Team Effectiveness Process and found that there are concrete, beneficial results for both the organization and individuals.

**Teams have been able to:**
- Improve business processes
- Increase efficiency
- Enhance client service
- Increase employee satisfaction, morale and work-life effectiveness

**Before and after measurements show**
- Time on low value work cut in half
- Higher quality of client service
- Increased productivity
- Increased employee satisfaction scores on surveys
- Lower stress
- Lower turnover