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Some Companies Derail the 'Burnout' Track
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Two years ago, Linda Davis, the Great Lakes-area sales manager for Hewlett-Packard, realized she had a crisis on her hands. Her sales team had been chalking up impressive revenues, but the strain of long work hours was showing. There were too many broken marriages, the attrition rate had risen to 20 percent in a tight labor market, and when asked on the annual company survey if they were "experiencing excessive pressure" on the job, more than 50 percent of her workers had said yes.

So when headquarters sought volunteers for an experimental program to reduce and redesign workloads, Ms. Davis jumped. Employees are now asked to set annual goals not only for productivity but for leisure as well. They are expected to meet both, and if they fall short, their supervisors have to answer for it. At monthly meetings, team members are asked to list three business goals and three personal ones. And when a staff member achieves a milestone, such as leaving at 2 P.M. to take a daughter ice skating, co-workers are encouraged to applaud with the same gusto as they would for someone landing an order for laser printers.

After nearly a decade of piling on the responsibilities, a smattering of American companies like Hewlett - Packard are beginning to worry about the consequences. Concerns ranging from a lack of creativity to "burnout" -- the point at which an employee becomes too tired to work effectively, or even at all -- have emerged as among the most urgent topics at human resources forums.

The movement to do something about the problem is inchoate -- many .companies are talking about it but do not know how to move from their old ways -- but some companies are experimenting with ways to alleviate workloads: everything from limiting work to 40 hours a week to discouraging employees from checking their E-mail and phone messages over the weekend.

At Hewlett - Packard, Ms. Davis acknowledges that the emphasis on leisure has had a noticeable effect on the work side of the equation. Some tasks have been reorganized so they can be shared by 9-to-5 administrative assistants. On the whole, she says, referring to how much an employee can accomplish in a day, "expectations have been lowered." Still, she says, productivity has not suffered where it counts. The Great Lakes area remains a top sales region, and out of a staff of 74, she lost only two people last year, and both of them were

promoted within the company. Moreover, several staff members who received outside offers have stayed put, and one top performer who had been lured away by a start-up actually returned.

Unlike the last wave of corporate initiatives aimed at helping employees balance work with their personal lives -- flexible hours, telecommuting, and concierge services -- new programs like Hewlett - Packard's aim for more than convenience. At their most ambitious they address the fundamental problem of how much time a job demands and how to build a life beyond work.

The incidence of burnout has not been measured in any meaningful way, but since the corporate downsizing of the 80's, American workers report feeling more pressed at work. Professionals and managers said they clocked an average of 48 hours a week, according to a 1997 work force study conducted by the Families and Work Institute, a nonprofit research group in New York.

But to judge by anecdotal evidence, a significant subgroup toils upward of 55 hours a week, while part-timers often find themselves putting in more than 35 hours a week. In the automobile and communications industries, hourly wage earners have also seen their week grow as mandatory overtime has become more prevalent.

The main impetus for the current effort to re-evaluate growing workloads is the drum-tight labor market, in which unemployment is at a 3D-year low. "These days," says Peter Cappelli, author of "The New Deal of Work: Managing the Market-Driven Workforce" (Harvard Business School Press, 1999), "employees are able to push back a lot more and are much less willing to work themselves to death."

Adjusting to the new environment has been especially difficult for the most demanding employers. The Big Five accounting firms, which are notorious for their grueling hours and travel schedules, have suddenly found that their young, intensively trained staff members are being snatched away. Deborah K. Holms, director of the office for retention at Ernst & Young, hopes the firm's new emphasis on "empathy and humanity" will build loyalty. Pilot programs being tested at the company include "permission" for employees not to answer their voice mail and E-mail over weekends and while on vacation, and "utilization committees" that monitor employee overtime and redistribute work when the total workload consistently registers more than 50 to 55 hours a week.

Beyond the straightforward problem of retention, corporations are motivated by a growing body of research that shows that working long hours over long periods is not necessarily cost-effective. Mindy Fried of the Center for Work and Family at Boston College has been trying to quantify how much money companies lose because of the errors and additional medical claims that result from overly long hours. "The research is pretty clear that as people work over a certain number of hours, productivity goes down, stress goes up, and work isn't as good," she says.

SAS Institute Inc. in North Carolina is a privately held software company that has experienced double-digit sales growth for two decades- It is also something of a workers' paradise, where full-time employees, starting with the chief executive officer, Jim Goodknight, clock in for just 35 hours a week. The company switchboard shuts down at 5 P.M., and the main gate is shut an hour later. Jeffrey Pfeffer, a professor at Stanford Business School, recently studied SAS, which is based in Cary, outside Raleigh. He concluded that not only did the company save tens of millions of dollars each year because its turnover rate was a fraction of the industry average, but it also gained by having more alert, less error-prone programmers.

David Russo, SAS's vice president for human resources, says that five years ago rivals considered the company's 40-hour workweek freakish and impractical, but "in the last two years, we've had 20 companies -- some really big companies -- come down and study what we're doing here. "

In Silicon Valley, intense pressure to stay on the technological cutting edge and to maintain high growth rates has made 16-hour days a norm. But after years of trying to entice programmers with idiosyncratic benefits like gourmet kitchens and pet-friendly office spaces, some companies are beginning to create a work pace that is more sustainable over the long term.

John Gage, the chief engineer at Sun Microsystems, the manufacturer of work stations and compatible software, describes his programmers as "lone poets" who get so involved in their work that they often will not leave their screens until the company pries them away. To sway these workaholics, Sun, which is based in Palo Alto, Calif., has developed an informal buddy system under which programmers monitor each other. "That way, if someone disappears into his office for a few days, someone will go rescue him," Mr. Gage explains. The company has also hired a slew of what he euphemistically calls "get a life" I counselors, whose job it is to coach code writers on the joys of the real world -- sunlight, bike riding, children.

Nor is the hours backlash limited to professional and managerial employees. Unions say that reducing mandatory overtime has become increasingly important to their members. The United Automobile Workers has made it one of the pillars of its official negotiating platform, proclaiming that "heavy and steady overtime work can lead to depression, fatigue and confusion."

Last year, the Communication Workers of America went on strike against US West until the telephone company agreed to a pay increase and to cut mandatory overtime in half, to a maximum of eight hours a week, by January 2001. Mike Withrow, vice president of C.W.A. Local 7777 in Englewood, Colo., said the time-and-a-half compensation did not make up for the fact that members felt "they didn't have a life."

Still, many workplace experts say they are seeing a lot more talk than action. Jeremy Rifkin, author of "The End of Work," laments, "We still have too many employers who have bought the idea that the only way you get ahead is by chaining your workers to their chairs until they drop."

Sue Meisinger, senior vice president of the Society of Human Resource Managers, says that the same tight labor market that makes companies consider reducing hours also makes them pile on the work. After all, the job has to get done somehow. "Companies see the problem, but they don't know how to fix it," she says. "There is plenty of wringing of hands, but if an employee goes on vacation and there is an emergency, you will call him." The only difference now? The company will "feel guilty" about the intrusion.