

# SMALL Business Times

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## It's your life

*Overburdened employees need to take control of their life/work balance*

By **DANIEL SCHROEDER**, for *Small Business Times*

**Question: It seems like it's getting harder and harder to leave work at work. I come in early and stay late. I take work home with me. I have a laptop computer, cellphone and pager. I feel like I can't get away from work. What can I, as one employee, do to respond to this disturbing situation?**

**Answer:** For starters, the first thing you can do is take notice and say, "Enough! I will do whatever I can within my sphere of influence to control how and when I work. I will strive to create a life-work balance that allows me to influence the manner in which I pursue work-related activities."

Let's be clear — we live in an information age in which we can work 24-7 if we want to. Technology has made the workplace more accessible than it ever has been.

Who is policing how much you work? If you're not, I'm not so sure that anyone else will be. After all, if you are the kind of employee who churns out more and more work as it is handed to you, your employer loves you!

How many bosses or organizations have the objectivity and insight to say, "You are doing the work of three people. We are concerned about the impact this will have on your physical and mental health in the future. Let's see what we can do to ease your burden."

The more typical response, it seems, is for the employer to say, "We've got a 'live one,' here. Let's see how much we can get out of

him/her."

Over time, this mindset, of course, only leads to disillusionment, disappointment and disenchantment on the part of the employee.

Confronted with arduous work conditions, employees are inclined to engage in any of a number of coping strategies. Not all of them are healthful, by the way. The U.S. Department of Labor suggests that about 10% of the workforce can be classified as alcoholic. The same percentage of employees has or will use illicit drugs.

Suffice it to say that a host of negative life outcomes attach to feeling stressed-out, over-burdened or out of control with respect to work.

There are a number of alternatives that organizations can pursue to encourage their employees to adopt healthful lifestyles. Those include:

- **Allowing employees more control** - The idea here is to provide employees more input over their work situations - hours of work, location of work, tools that may be accessed, etc.
- **Defining roles** - Uncertainty or ambiguity regarding the work to be done, the approach to be used, the outcome that is sought, etc., all add up to a stressful situation. Better to offer concrete expectations and clear-cut statements of the criteria to be used in evaluating performance.
- **Providing stimulating work** - Too much or too little challenge can lead to feelings of frustration. One way to ensure that people feel challenged is to probe into individual motives and values in order to construct jobs that are personally stimulating and organizationally enriching.
- **Social support** - Many employees can profit from the opportunity to connect with others who are going through the same experience or confronting the same challenges. Encouraging employees to form formal or informal support groups (e.g., "brown bag" lunch groups) can go a long way to diffusing the feeling of "I'm in this all by myself."
- **Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)** - EAPs are coun-

selling and related services for a variety of employee health concerns.

A variety of interventions are possible, ranging from drug and alcohol treatment to stress management, relaxation training, biofeedback training and exercise and nutritional programming.

The goal in all of these programs is to encourage employees to modify their behavior in order to choose life-enhancing rather than life-draining pursuits.

Let me just say that no matter how well intentioned an employer may be with regard to the interventions that I have listed above, the individual ultimately decides if he/she will pursue them. So while I can appreciate the extent to which you are feeling burdened or perhaps even “cornered,” my question to you is, “What are you going to do about it?”

Certainly, if you are in a position of managerial authority, I would encourage you to help your organization to explore one or more of the options that I listed above. Managers, especially top managers, influence and shape the corporate culture.

You can go a long way toward helping employees make better choices if all you do is show them how it is done through your own approach. Having some organization-sponsored programs in place makes that easier, of course.

As an individual contributor, you have less power, authority and clout than if you occupy a role higher up in the chain of command. Yet, a simple rule must be called out — “You are the master of your own destiny. You are living inside your own skin. If

things aren't working out, you have to be one the take ownership of the situation. You need to be the one to do something about it.”

That means you will want to investigate what, if any, programs your company has in place. If there are none, you will want to explore community-based programs and self-help approaches. There are a host of alternatives to consider ranging from participation in formal programs in biofeedback and relaxation training to books on tape that you can listen to on the way to and from work.

So, in the final analysis, my words to you are, “Take control of your work life. Make better choices. Look inside at your core values and let them lead you.”

In doing so, I believe you will find that you have more control than you think you do.

And, over time, I believe you will find that taking more time for you actually leads to more energy, more enthusiasm, and more productivity.



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