

Tools You Can Use: For Managers

As summer is a season for recharging, here's an article you can share with managers so they can help employees feel more balanced, focused and revitalized.

Antidotes to Overwork

Feeling like your job is gobbling up your time, your energy and everything else in your life? If so, you're far from alone. A new survey by the nonprofit Families and Work Institute (FWI) found that one-third of U.S. employees feel chronically overworked.

Overwork is easy to identify when you're experiencing it. It's the feeling of having too much to do in too little time, but its causes aren't so simple to pin down. It is not just an imbalance between the work required and the time allotted to do it. It seems to stem from the *quality* of the work experience as much as the quantity.

Here are some things you can do to help those you supervise feel more balanced, focused and revitalized.

Encourage time for family

Overwork is related to issues of morale and engagement. Doing work one loves, feeling in control and feeling valued are all antidotes to it. Personal priorities also contribute to (or tend to prevent) overwork. The FWI survey found that "employees who are family-centric (put a higher priority on family than on work) or dual-centric (put an equivalent priority on family and work) are less likely to be overworked than employees who are work-centric."

The classic workaholic, in other words, feels more overwhelmed on the job than the worker who makes a point of giving at least equal time to family, friends and other interests outside the office. A commitment to work-life balance makes work seem more manageable.

Take away for managers: These findings carry a clear message—it's not just the workload that wears people out. Low morale, disengagement and a toxic culture also can leave workers feeling depleted by their jobs. Managers need to encourage workers to take time for their families and to discourage the idea that they must put in long hours to prove their loyalty and get ahead. A work-first, family-second atmosphere hurts recruitment as well as retention.

Establish buffers to cut distractions and stop wasting time

The human brain can do amazing things, but it is designed to do only one of them at a time. Too often, employees are faced—or tempted—with doing several things at once. In the modern world of multitasking, at any given moment they may be juggling a couple of assigned jobs, e-mails, a cell and/or land-line call, a conversation with a co-worker, and maybe something interesting on the Web. That employee may be many things, but focused is not one of them.

The FWI study cited such workplace distractions as key factors contributing to overwork. "Particularly important is what we call lack of 'focus'—or more precisely, the inability to focus on one's work because of constant interruptions and distractions as well as excessive multi-tasking required to keep up with all that has to be done on the job," according to survey results.

Employees and management share the blame for this. Some distractions, such as Web surfing and shooting the breeze with co-workers, are largely the worker's choice. An employee who wants to procrastinate will seek them out. (That employee will no doubt feel overworked when scrambling to catch up as a deadline looms.)

Take away for managers: Managers and work teams can do a lot to keep distractions at bay and to let workers concentrate on the work that needs to be done. Employees need what organizational behavior consultant Kerry Patterson calls “buffers.” If someone needs a couple of hours to finish a report, a supervisor should think twice before interrupting her with a call, an e-mail message or a meeting—or letting others do the same.

Conduct effective meetings

Speaking of meetings—these tend to be “low-value work,” in management parlance, especially if they go on too long or if they're not really needed. Low-value work contributes to overwork both by extending time at the office unnecessarily and robbing employees of hours that they could use more productively.

Take away for managers: Mark Sinevich, an author and speaker on work-life balance, suggests that all meetings should have a one-page objective list with a strict timeline, and short meetings be conducted with everyone standing. And in meetings, as elsewhere, he says it's important to cut the distractions: “During a meeting, don't answer the cell phone. Don't even turn it on.”

Ensure vacations have maximum impact

Everyone needs to get time off now and then to recharge his batteries. But a significant minority of American workers don't take full advantage of their paid time off. In the FWI survey, 36 percent of the employees said they did not plan to use all of the paid vacation days to which they were entitled. Large majorities of vacationers also reported feeling more relaxed (83 percent) and more energized (74 percent) after taking their longest vacation of the year.

What makes a vacation successful? One factor is real detachment from the office. Personal productivity expert Laura Stack says some professionals (such as doctors) may have to stay in contact, but even they can take steps to limit the times when they can be called. Clearing the decks beforehand is also important, both by making sure one's responsibilities are covered and by working ahead if possible.

Take away for managers: Vacations have their best and most lasting impact if vacationing workers aren't dreading the pile of tasks that await them on their return. This is where smart management can make a difference. Supervisors and team leaders should do as much as possible to make sure that a vacationer's responsibilities are fully covered while they're gone and that their work doesn't stack up in their absence. Finally, says the FWI report, employers should encourage all workers to take the breaks to which they're entitled and “to take them in longer stretches if possible.”

Resources

A summary of the FWI report can be found at

www.familiesandwork.org/summary/overwork2005.pdf.

Leave the Office Earlier by Laura Stack. Broadway Books, 2004.

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