

IN THIS ARTICLE
Quality of Work Life, Stress Management

O V E R

Overwork takes a huge toll on employee health and morale—and

C O M I N G

eventually, on company performance. Does your organizational

O V E R

environment push people into overdoing? There is a better way.

D O I N G

BY LISA REINHART AND ELIZABETH DANZIGER

The head of human resources at a major corporation asked recently, "Why should I train people to overcome overdoing? At our company, we promote overdoing." But studies show that an organizational environment that promotes compulsive overwork ultimately loses productivity. When overdoing becomes the norm, absenteeism rises, health-care costs rise, creativity languishes, and productivity plummets.

When we say "overdoing," we mean doing so much work that a person loses a sense of identity, loses touch with physical needs, and loses touch with other people. Some people believe that they can't stop working. That belief may be compelled by staggering workloads or by compulsive workaholicism. Either way, their health and their family relationships suffer. Ironically, so does their productivity.

Whether their overwork is situational or ongoing, people who have gone beyond hard work into compulsive overdoing have many behaviors in common. They are always in a rush—or they are impatient and irritable but don't know why. Many use coffee, cigarettes, sugar, or excessive exercise to pep them up—and alcohol or other substances to help them slow down. But when they disconnect from their own fatigue and stress levels, they lose the ability to pace themselves and to know when their judgment has been impaired.

This syndrome has become increasingly common—and increasingly costly—during recent decades. Juliet Schor, author of *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, writes, "Nearly one in three adults say they experience high stress every day.... Workers' compensation claims related to stress tripled during the first half of the 1980s alone."

Organizational overdoing

In an atmosphere where everyone is overloaded, people don't feel challenged and excited anymore. They just feel stressed out.

Every office goes through spurts

of intense pressure to meet particular deadlines or fill particular orders, but such periods are normally followed by less-pressured periods. If the high pressure never stops, you might consider whether your office is a work-addicted environment.

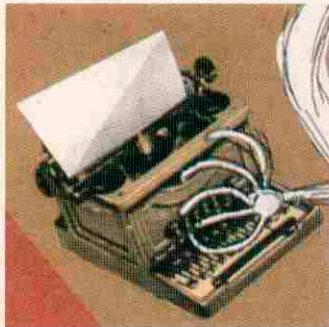
How can you tell if your organization is too dependent on overwork? Everyone has her or his own patterns of work. And every organization has its own way of managing work—and overwork. Do people in your organization believe they are working more and producing less than they used to? If such beliefs are widespread, they may indicate an organizational environment that pushes people into overdoing.

The overdoing syndrome manifests itself in measurable ways in an organization, including the following:

- a decrease in work output, as people lose their ability to "bounce back" from the perpetual pressure to maintain the work pace

- an increase in absenteeism due to illness, particularly stress-related illness such as back pain, migraine, temporomandibular joint syndrome (a problem with the jaw), eating disorders, sleep disorders, and high blood pressure

- an increase in accidents due to fatigue, overexertion, or poor concentration; people may take on loads they know will injure them, because the workaholic environment leaves them reluctant to refuse supervisors' requests.



The illnesses and accidents lead to an increase in medical insurance claims and workers' compensation claims. Donald De Carlo, senior vice-president and general counsel for the Gulf Insurance Company, is the author of *Stress in the American Workplace: Alternative for the Walking Wounded*. In it, he writes that workaholics are dangerous to themselves and others. He says such people are partially responsible for the \$150 million in stress-related claims filed each year.

In other words, overdoing can be damaging, both to employees' health and to companies' bottom lines.

Alternatives to overwork

Companies that reverse the trend of overwork are likely to see positive results.

In *Changes* magazine, De Carlo reports on the case of a manufacturing company in which three plants were making the same product. Stress and physical-injury claims were disproportionately high at one of the plants. An industrial psychologist investigated and discovered that workaholic managers at that plant were loading tremendous stress on workers. By changing the management style at the plant, the company was able to increase productivity and reduce accidents over a period of three years. Unfortunately, De Carlo laments, few companies deal directly with the problem in that way.

Some organizations have found other ways of overcoming overdoing. For example, teaching employees to "lighten up" about their workloads and themselves can help relieve the stress associated with overwork.

Cathy Fowler is a trainer with US West Communications, a 63,000-employee company based in Colorado. She says that her company went through a series of "lighten-up" training programs from the C.W. Metcalf Company. The training taught people to take their jobs seriously, she says—but not to take themselves too seriously.

"We see definite changes in people's ability to handle their workloads" since the training, Fowler says. "It has increased people's flexibility and ability to handle groups. People's attitudes have improved, and they feel less overwhelmed. Everyone from managers and lawyers to [line workers] uses these techniques."

The training offers US West employees a variety of mechanisms for lowering their stress levels. For example, when managers expect a meeting to include a potentially stressful discussion, they might suggest that people bring clown noses with them to lighten the atmosphere.

Saturn Corporation, the General Motors subsidiary, has taken a similar approach. Laurie Danko, training team leader at Saturn, says the company brought in "lighten-up" training two years ago, and found that it applied both to employees' work

lives and to their home lives.

"People found that they were able to cope with stress and increased workloads much differently than they had ever thought," Danko explains. She says that the training helped employees enjoy their work more, despite having a lot of work to do. It also showed them how to renegotiate their workloads to avoid overdoing.

Eight ways to overcome overdoing

Trainers can work with managers and HR specialists to help create an environment in which employees can thrive for the long term. Workers who suffer from true work addiction are likely to need personal counseling before they can really give up their compulsion to overwork. But companies that heed eight basic principles can help employees who are overworked and would like to stop:

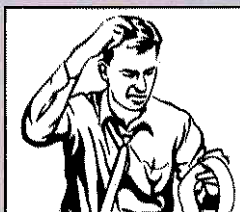
- ▶ Be flexible. Try to allow flexible hours. Give employees some say in organizing and carrying out their work. Charles Rodgers, vice-president of the Boston consulting firm Work/Family Directions, says, "A lot of people want *flexible* hours, not shorter hours."
- ▶ Teach people to negotiate alternatives. When requested to do more than they can handle, many people don't know how to say no. They take on tasks that they don't know how to do. Or they accept work that they don't have time to do well. Teach them to ask, "How firm is this time deadline?" or "Is there anyone else who could do this?" Have them communicate information about their current workloads, so that managers can assign work as equitably as possible.
- ▶ Set realistic deadlines. Don't create artificial pressure; if something really isn't urgent, tell a worker, for instance, "This does not have to be done immediately, but I do need it by the end of the month."
- ▶ Pay back overtime with time, not with money. Where legal, allow people to bank overtime hours for use as vacation, and require them to use accrued vacation time by the end of each year.
- ▶ Encourage employees to exercise regularly. Regular exercise causes the body to release endorphins, which reduce stress and anxiety and

This is an extremely powerful software package for managing course scheduling and training of corporate employees. It is applicable in the situation where a corporation maintains an internal training department for the benefit of its employees who sign up as students for various courses, and the registrar is responsible for the overall smooth functioning of the department. This software will help the registrar with automatic scheduling, rescheduling, wait-list handling, cancellations, first/second confirmations, rosters, certificates, pre-work notices, enrollment reports, financial reports, billing, recall notices, mailing labels and much, much more.

The complete software, with on-disk documentation, is available at no cost or obligation, for a full three month's trial period! For more information, please call **Datamation, Inc., 80 Boniface Dr., Rochester, NY 14620. 716-442-1791**
Circle No. 117 on Reader Service Card

FORGET SOMETHING?

Most companies usually do. They aggressively spend thousands of dollars training personnel, but do little or nothing to measure their investment. Now, there is a simple solution: **Test Construction Set™** and **Survey Construction Set™**.



Skills Assessment Software

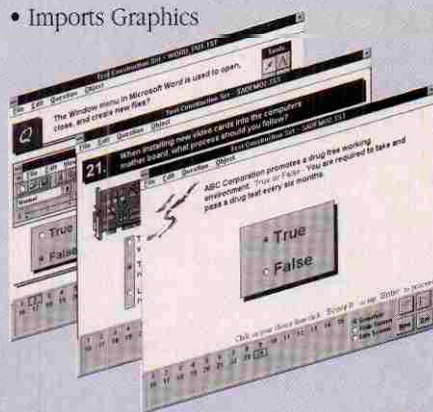
These easy-to-use Windows®-based software programs allow the user to develop skills assessment tests to measure competency levels on any subject. For example, safety regulations, computer skills, management skills, opinions and evaluations, all can be measured by these dynamic tools. Here are some of the features:

- Measures Soft/Hard Skills
- Allows for Adaptive Testing
- Runs on a Network
- Designs Unlimited Tests
- Creates Rosters
- Depicts Results as Charts and Graphs
- Protects Tests with a Password
- Contains Tool Kit for Drawing Graphics
- Scores Results Immediately
- Imports Graphics

Why CTSC?

Having trained and tested thousands of individuals, CTSC has had first-hand experience with designing computer-based evaluation programs. For a free demo copy, call:

1-800-884-CTSC



C T S C
COMPUTER TRAINING & SUPPORT CORPORATION
14115 Farmington Rd.
Livonia, MI 48154
(313) 525-1400

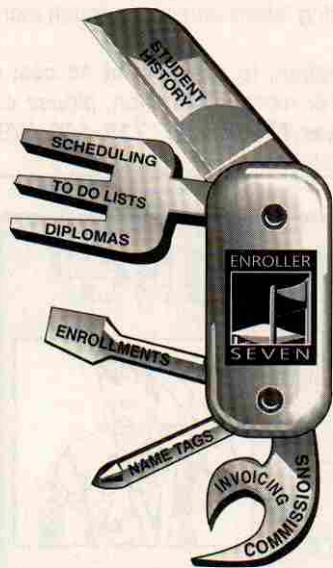
Visit us at ASTD Booth #942

Pre-Made Software Tests Available

- Aldus PageMaker®
- CorelDraw®
- dBase IV®
- DOS 6.0®
- Harvard Graphics®
- Lotus 1-2-3®
- Microsoft Access®
- Microsoft Excel®
- Microsoft Powerpoint®
- Microsoft Project®
- Microsoft Windows®
- Microsoft Word®
- Paradox®
- Quark Xpress®
- Quattro Pro®
- WordPerfect®

Circle No. 123 on Reader Service Card

Everything you need for training management,



in one easy to use tool.

Why reach for a separate database program, spreadsheet program and a pad of paper when you can just click on real power? Introducing the most complete package of training administration tools in the industry: Enroller Seven. Whether you are using a Macintosh®, Windows®, single user, multi-user or SQL, Enroller Seven is ready to work with you. Not just some programmer's idea of what you need, Enroller Seven was designed over the last six years in real training situations with the help of professionals like you. Enroller Seven has the flexibility to work with your simplest or most complex training program. And, although rich in features, Enroller Seven is easy to use. Access the features you need, turn off the features you don't need. Call today for a free guided tour and see the benefit of one easy to use tool: Enroller Seven™.

- Features include:**
- Student History
 - Progress Tracking
 - Attendance
 - Invoices & Payments
 - Rosters & Name tags
 - Confirmations
 - Scheduling
 - Cash Control & Accounting Data
 - Client/Server
 - Waiting Lists
 - Certificates & Diplomas
 - and much more!

COMPUTER DYNAMICS

1905 WISTERIA
DENTON, TEXAS 76205
FAX 817/382-5089

1/800/566-4447

Circle No. 129 on Reader Service Card

Resources on Quality of Work Life

Need more information on enhancing the quality of work life or balancing work with personal life? Try the following articles that have appeared recently in *Training & Development*.

- ▶ "Violence in the Workplace," by Helen Frank Bensimon. January 1994.
- ▶ "Family Ties and Bottom Lines," by Bonnie Michaels and Elizabeth McCarty. March 1993.
- ▶ "Through Japanese Eyes," by William C. Byham and George Dixon. March 1993.
- ▶ "Balancing Act," by Betsy Jacobson and Beverly Kaye. February 1993.

- ▶ "Enhance Your Sense of Self-Worth," by Terry Braverman. July 1993.
- ▶ "Your Personal Mission Statement: A Foundation for Your Future," by George L. Morrisey. November 1992.

To purchase reprints of these articles, please contact ASTD Customer Service at 703/683-8100. Single article photocopies are \$6 each; the package is \$15. Phone for prices on bulk orders (50 or more) of custom reprints. Call to order by credit card, or send your order to ASTD Customer Service, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043.

improve concentration and morale. You may be able to negotiate a group rate at a local gym or offer on-site yoga or aerobics classes.

- ▶ Offer nutritious foods for snacks during breaks. Coffee, soft drinks, candy bars, and cookies give people short bursts of energy. But ultimately, junk food can make people tired and irritable. Provide milk, fruit juice, herbal teas, rice cakes, or whole-grain crackers as alternatives.
- ▶ Do business during business hours only. Avoid scheduling meetings before and after regular work hours.
- ▶ Lighten up. Every situation has a potentially humorous side—if you look for it. Find the absurdity in difficult situations. Look for ways to help people take themselves less seriously; for example, bring rubber chickens or other toys to deadly-serious meetings. Work is important. But in the end, it is only one part of a well-balanced life.

Balanced workloads: the trend of the future

Overwork just doesn't work anymore. People cannot sustain the pace and stay sane and productive. The people who overwork because they cannot stop—for organizational or personal reasons—will ultimately burn themselves out. Some employees cannot accept alternatives to overdoing because of their own inner drives. Consider referring such people to the company's employee-assistance program for professional counseling.

The real winners will be those

Eight Ways To Overcome Overwork

- ▶ Be flexible.
- ▶ Teach people to negotiate alternatives.
- ▶ Set realistic deadlines.
- ▶ Pay back overtime with time, not with money.
- ▶ Encourage employees to exercise regularly.
- ▶ Have nutritious foods available for snacks during breaks.
- ▶ Try to do business only during business hours.
- ▶ Lighten up.

who know how to pace themselves and recharge their energy reserves as they go along. People may find that when they stop overdoing, their "doing" will be more satisfying and more complete. ■

Lisa Reinhart is the founder and director of the Lisa Reinhart Center, 11764 Tennessee Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90064. **Elizabeth Danziger**, a communications consultant, is the founder of *Worktalk Communications Consulting*, 1022 Indiana Court, Venice, CA 90291.

To purchase reprints of this article, please send your order to ASTD Customer Service, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043. Single photocopies, at \$6 each, must be prepaid. Bulk orders (50 or more) of custom reprints may be billed. Phone 703/683-8100 for price information.