

# Got Stress?

Three experts target the source and the means to combat it.

**S**maller staffs, higher expectations, and electronic communication all contribute to a sense of never being away from the office. Many employees feel as if they are working longer than eight hours a day even when they are not at work. Technology and outsourcing were supposed to make jobs easier, yet there is little evidence that the burdens of everyday work are lighter. As several surveys on workplace conditions indicate, workplace stress is a growing

concern that is not being adequately addressed by management.

To gain a better understanding of how changes in the workplace led to increased stress, T+D invited workplace experts to participate in a roundtable discussion about the causes of stress. Ed Jensen, a human resources partner with Accenture; Edward Rockey, a professor at Pepperdine University; and Joanne Sujansky, founder and CEO of KEYGroup Consulting, give their viewpoints and offer some prescriptions for stress relief.

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**Question:** *Is workplace stress greater or lesser than it was in previous generations? Why?*

**Jensen:** While we have no research that definitively answers the question, anecdotal information suggests that stress levels are higher today. In the last 20 years, advances in technology have offered people the ability to work 24/7, and we've seen a well-documented trend in increased productivity metrics. Clearly, organizations are doing more work with fewer people. At the same time, competition has heated up in virtually every industry and the pace at which things need to get done has increased. All of this increases the amount of stress on employees.

**Rockey:** Supposedly, email and computerization were going to eliminate paper and make our lives easier. And that's not even mentioning PDAs, text messaging, cell phones, and so forth. Most of us are feeling increased pressure to be available every minute to respond to electronic communications. There was a more leisurely pace in responding to messages in the pre-computer age.

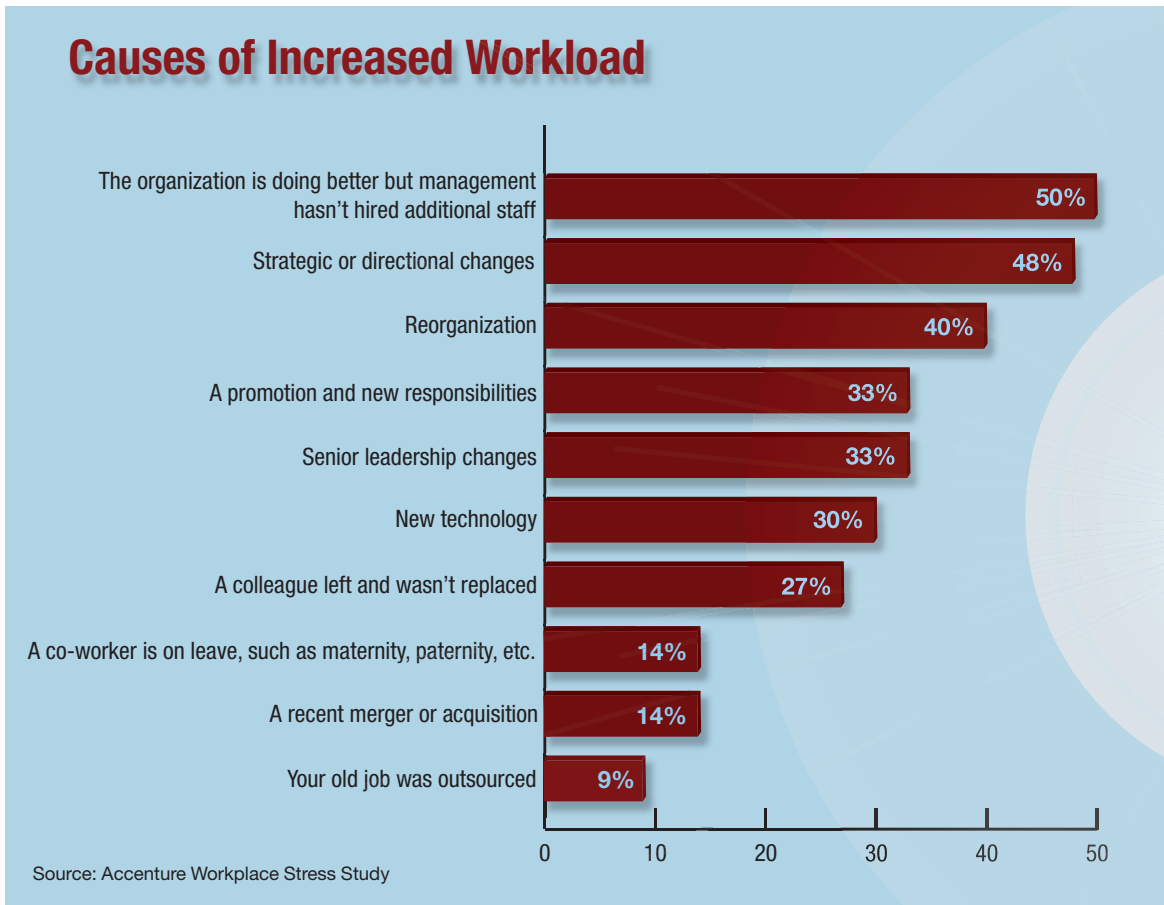
**Sujansky:** Certainly it's not less. We all face pressure to do more with less—and by that I mean shorter time frames, smaller budgets, fewer employees—

and to do it right the first time. There's a lot of competition out there, for your job and for your customers, so you'd better get it right—even if it's not stated outright, that is the implication. Globalization is a big part of this mind-set. In the back of your mind lurks the knowledge that there are plenty of people in China or India who will do the same work you're doing for a lot less money. That's just a fact. We do know that stress is for real.

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**Question:** *How can workplace stress be measured independently of personal stress? How much does one's personal life overlap with feelings of workplace stress?*

**Jensen:** I can't imagine how you can separate the two. The crux of the stress issue is that work intersects with the rest of your life. And at that intersection, stress extends across both the workplace and an employee's life. If you're having problems at work, you can't shut them off when you leave, especially given the blurring of lines between when people work and when they don't work. While it's not the role of an organization to manage employees' personal lives, fostering a work environment that places a high priority on a healthy work-life balance is important. In the end, work may be a key factor contributing to what we call personal stress.



**Rockey:** Certainly there are personal life stressors that pressure us independently of workplace issues. An earlier stress scale inventory identified such personal life burdens as death of a loved one, divorce, and personal bankruptcy. But your body's systems—respiratory, digestive, nervous, and so forth—don't know the difference between work-related and personal issues. The combined stressors can all add up to ulcers, hypertension, and worse.

**Sujansky:** In a survey we conducted, one out of five workers said their productivity on the job suffers because the company causes unnecessary stress. And it's not even the "normal" stress that comes with doing a good job that drives people crazy—it's the unnecessary stress, such as poor communication between managers and workers, lack of resources to do the job, ineffective bosses who can't or won't get rid of low performers, and poor scheduling of projects that causes back-to-back deadlines. Try as they may, employees can't always leave their personal lives at their doorsteps. And let's talk about child care and elder care. Now that there are many single-parent families as well as dual-income families, there is no one at home during the day to care for a sick child or older

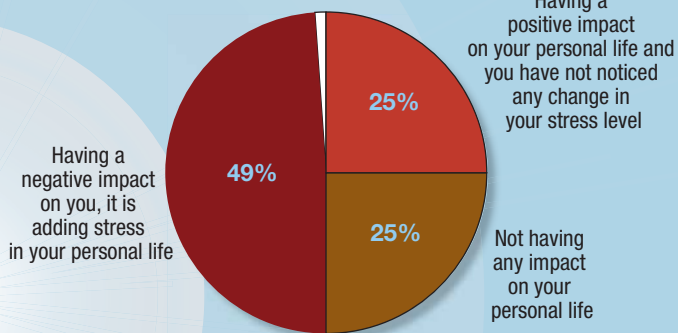
parent. All of these factors combine to create a stressed-out, less resilient worker.

**Question:** *In the current marketplace, are employees expected to work harder with less staff support or are people simply trying to accomplish more in a shorter time period?*

**Jensen:** To be honest, both. Organizations often provide employees with new tools to enhance their productivity. Managers assume that they'll see an instant productivity increase and adjust staffing levels accordingly. The reality is that productivity gains don't appear overnight, and organizations don't achieve them without addressing the people aspect and understanding that there's always a transition period. For example, a new computer to enhance payroll or billing efficiency will be effective only if managers educate the appropriate employees about expected changes, provide adequate training, and coach them when problems arise.

**Rockey:** Both. All my MBA students attend class at night, after working all day. Often they report that

## Effects of Increased Workload



Source: Accenture Workplace Stress Study

	Total	Positive Impact	Negative Impact
Men	57%	57%	55%
Women	43%	43%	45%
18-34	33%	28%	28%
35-54	54%	65%	62%
55+	13%	7%	10%
Median Age	41 years old	42 years old	42 years old
\$50K	41%	37%	42%
\$50K-\$75K	23%	21%	26%
\$75K+	36%	42%	32%

they are putting in 60 hours a week or more at their companies, and with less staff support. And the longer work week is simply expected, or you're not seen as a dedicated team player.

**Sujansky:** The most honest answer is both. We are constantly reading about reductions in the workforce while productivity indices climb. It's just the new reality that we all have to live with. All we can do is cut the fat, ratchet up the output, and hope that our company is still around in 10 years.

And I must again bring up the fact that we live in an "instant" world. Our clients and customers expect immediate responses to their voice messages and emails. Don't you?

What's more, we want instant results. Consider this training conundrum: Managers want skills to be developed, and they want the training—which used to take three days to complete—to take place in three hours.

**Question:** *Technology such as email, fax, and the Internet has taken away a lot of administrative tasks. Where is the source of stress coming from?*

**Jensen:** Technology is a double-edged sword. While it has removed some administrative tasks, it has made people more accessible and processes have been ac-

celerated. As a result, the emphasis has shifted from what employees are doing to what's expected of them in terms of communication. Ultimately, the idea that technology has made workers more productive is something of an illusion.

Corporate culture can exacerbate this. For example, because technology makes it possible, senior managers at some companies are expected to be available 24/7 or, at least, be one step ahead of their clients. Those expectations—and the resulting stress—permeate throughout the company, reaching down to middle managers and even to their staff. Additionally, we live in an era of cyclical or planned downsizing, and, if you don't want to be a candidate for downsizing, you work harder and longer. The result is that employees live with yet another form of stress.

**Rockey:** Heated competition and increased customer demand are among the sources of aggravated stress. Yes, consumers already have such wonders as Black-Berries, iPods and so forth, but in this "give-me-more, give-me-now age," the customer wants a better model immediately, and then a newer gadget ASAP. There's now a ski jacket with compartments for your iPod and cell phone and built-in speakers in the hood, with controls on the sleeve. So you can switch from phone calls to music by tapping your sleeve. What's next? That's so last month!

**Sujansky:** Well, for one thing, technology has promoted a lack of personal contact, which can result in more misunderstandings. Many people fall prey to the “email is easier” syndrome. When you leave a critical word out and your recipient misunderstands and then does the wrong thing that is a recipe for greater stress. Poorly worded or carelessly read emails lead to unclear expectations, which leads to mistakes, which leads to more stress. The sad thing is that living with this kind of ambiguity has come to seem “normal” in many companies. We don’t have time to ask for clarification; we just do it and hope for the best. In our survey, 47 percent of respondents said they did not get feedback at least one time per week. So stress comes from doing unnecessary tasks—or doing necessary tasks wrong—and it also comes from employees being uncertain about how their performance is viewed.

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**Question:** *Do organizations do enough to combat the effects of stress? What are the most effective means of combating workplace stress?*

**Jensen:** In a recent Accenture survey, 49 percent of employees said that their increased workload was having a negative impact and was adding stress to their personal lives. Given that, it’s safe to say that most organizations probably haven’t done enough.

What companies should be doing is acknowledging that there’s an issue, understanding the sources of stress, determining which ones they can address, and implementing a plan to do that. Some industries, like finance, have a reputation for high stress, and they attract people who thrive on and are compensated for it but who often burn out and leave quickly. In other industries, employees are willing to make trade-offs for less stress. Today, employees evaluate prospective employers carefully. “Best places to work” rankings are increasingly important, and prospects often want to talk with employees at their level to understand what it’s really like to work at a company. Attracting and retaining the best people is no longer just about compensation or a long-term career. It’s about the levels of stress employees are willing to accept.

**Rockey:** There’s no quick fix for such a difficult challenge, but I’ve discovered there are several approaches that help employees function successfully under pressure. One is to train employees to build personal resilience so that when stress occurs in the workplace they are fit to handle it. Another method is prevention, often helped by learning such skills as effective planning techniques, time management, and how to run successful meetings. With

such skills, employees can squelch lots of stress before it occurs.

**Sujansky:** It’s important to allow employees to have flexibility. If someone stays late at work to complete a project, is it really necessary that he is at his desk the next day at 8 am? Maybe not. Being rigid and a slave driver increases stress, not to mention resentment. Pay attention to what keeps talent—challenging work, resources to do the job, proper training and development, and, most of all, solid leadership from the boss. When these are missing, employees get stressed and are more likely to jump ship. They need to build on small successes and milestones and give feedback, both positive and corrective, on a regular basis. This not only reduces stress, it invigorates team members to produce their best. Finally, communication needs to be raised to an art form. Don’t just share information—make your organization transparent.

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**Question:** *Do organizations know how to promote a work-life balance in meaningful ways? Are staff retreats, team lunches, or other social outings effective?*

**Jensen:** Given that people feel overworked, pushed too hard, and are not recognized for their contributions, if these efforts help relieve some stress and promote recognition, they can be very effective. But they are not the panacea. Instead, companies need to understand how their employees feel about working for them. The answers may lead them to address all kinds of talent management issues, from the aging baby boomers to training to increased competition for the best people.

**Rockey:** There’s a real need for a supportive work environment. The organizations that are practicing the “if you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen” philosophy will burn people out. An organizational culture that respects employees’ limits, encourages innocent fun, and offers encouragement will be more likely to retain employees and have long-range productivity. Reports on the best companies to work for support this idea.

**Sujansky:** Some do. Others can stand to make big improvements. I’m concerned about companies that espouse a work-till-you-drop ethic, as they are truly on a self-destructive path. Generations X and Y insist on a balanced life, and companies that don’t nurture this balance are hammering nails into their own coffins. Practice what you preach. If you work till 8 pm every night, employees will feel pressured to do the same. Avoid scheduling meetings very early or late in the day. If you must ask someone to stay past

# Successfully Managing Stress

By Michael Laff

You've just returned from two long meetings and now must catch up with dozens of emails. After that, you race to finish a presentation in time for tomorrow's meeting with your boss.

Sometimes the pace of work is so intense that employees have to schedule time to relax.

More employees are turning to stress-reduction activities, such as walks outside the office, meeting a professional masseuse, or even listening to audio relaxation programs. In a sense, today's employees must learn to breathe again.

Michelle Moscona, co-founder of Captura Group, an online marketing business in San Diego, said she and others in her organization use WorkSmart, a set of CD-ROMs that help to slow down the pace of a hectic work week.

## Relaxation techniques

The narrator's calm, reassuring voice resembles one you might hear during a yoga course. Like many relaxation techniques, it is intended to counter the incessant demands of cell phones, email, and multi-tasking, which are part of everyday work occurrences.

Listeners are encouraged to participate in a quiet, comfortable setting. Using a silent background, the female narrator walks the audience through deliberate breathing exercises. The likely program audience is younger middle and senior managers who may be feeling the pressure of simultaneous professional and personal demands.

Moscona uses the program about once a week. Her company keeps 20 copies of the CD that are made available to the entire staff, regardless of status. The organization began using the program about three months ago. Staff can use it whenever they wish.

The company, which employs 25 individuals, learned of the program because its creator, Jean McPhee, is well known in the San Diego area.

"It helps you gain perspective and balance," Moscona says. "At the end of the day that's important for productivity. Our organization values a work-life balance because it makes for a more productive employee."

New hires are encouraged to view the program because it provides an overview of the organization's culture.

## User-friendly

The program is broken into long and short segments, depending upon the user's needs.

Some segments are as long as 20 minutes while others are less than 10 minutes. The segments are similar as a female voice encourages listeners to concentrate only on their breathing, thereby slowing down their thought process.

"I use it almost daily," says Marissa Blankenship, a financial analyst in San Francisco. She first learned of its existence from a friend.

Blankenship prefers to use the CD-ROM at home after work for 30-minute periods, explaining that it is necessary to be relaxed in order to gain real value from the technique. The narrated program provides some needed mental relaxation.

"Listening to your breath and letting your mind go are two of the hardest things to do," she says.

Blankenship passed the program along to some of her physician friends.

**Michael Laff** is an associate editor for *T+D*; mlaff@astd.org

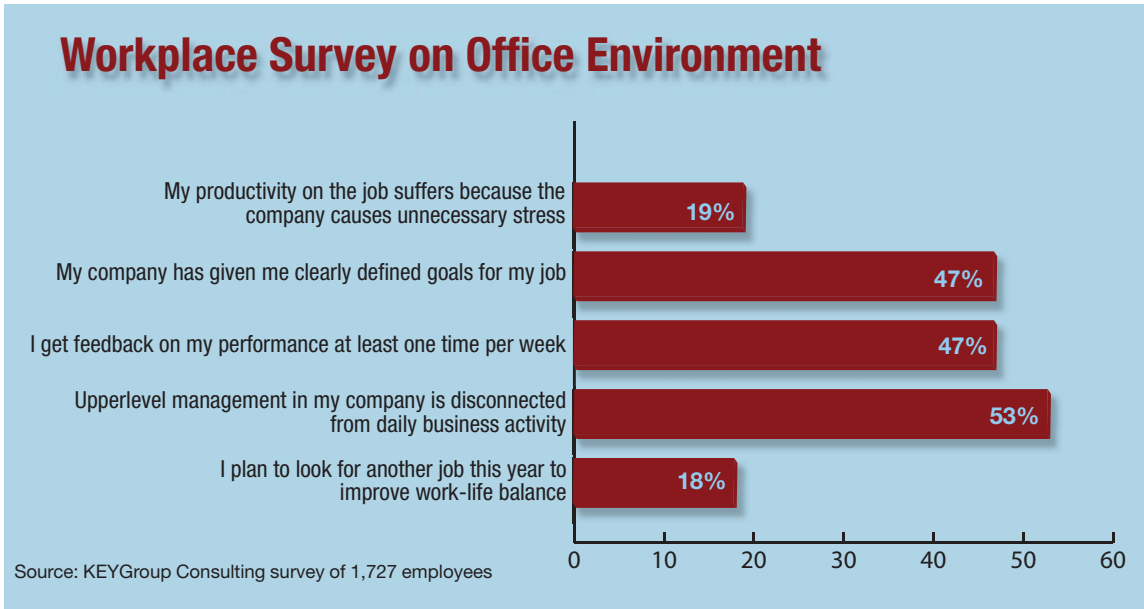
day-care pickup hours once in a blue moon, that's okay. Do it regularly and it's a problem. Show respect for all lifestyles. Single people need to get home, too. As for retreats, lunches, and social outings—well, I think they're fine when done periodically. Too much "forced fun" is anything but.

**Question:** *What new activities or other benefits could organizations offer?*

**Jensen:** Wellness programs, including exercise facilities, work well. We've seen an increase in leaves-of-absence, in which people take from three to nine months off to recharge. In some organizations, employees are encouraged to volunteer for charitable activities during the work day. Managers should start

by evaluating the level of stress in the workplace and then explore new ideas. Instead of having the management team make these decisions, they should form a task force or committee that represents the staff and have those employees participate in determining the best approach.

**Rockey:** I visited a company in Ventura, California, Patagonia, and saw employees doing Tai Chi during lunch hour. Some companies have gyms and yoga classes to build fitness. People are also helped by coaching in mental rehearsal so they can see themselves performing calmly and effectively under stress, similar to what top athletes have reported about rehearsing an activity in their minds prior to a game. Some organizations offer social time with refreshments. One company distributes M&Ms every Wednesday.



**Sujansky:** Encourage managers to conduct “stay” interviews rather than exit interviews. Although I don’t advocate micromanagement, managers need to have a pulse on things. Ask your employees, especially those you want to keep, what would help them gain more satisfaction from their work. Entrepreneurial employees want to set their own hours. Let them. In fact, encourage them. Consider providing a work-from-home option. People can be far more productive away from the chaos of the office. And by the way, if you don’t trust your employees to “really” be working, they shouldn’t be employees, should they?

**Question:** *If a manager notices a staff member or team is under increasing stress, what should he do to alleviate it?*

**Jensen:** He should start with understanding the source of increased stress. There may be an individual on the team who is causing problems for others or there may be personal issues. The manager might want to do a better job of recognizing the employee’s contribution or even encourage the person to take advantage of counseling.

According to our survey, 50 percent of respondents said the chief reason they have more work is because of management’s reluctance to hire additional staff, despite the fact that their organizations are doing better. Clearly, some managers are already doing so, but, as we know, finding and hiring top talent takes time.

**Rockey:** Open-ended questions and a listening ear really help. Managers can simply inquire about how things are going, and then be totally present as authentic, caring listeners who avoid discounting com-

ments. The “it was once even more horrible” stories make the sufferer feel worse, not better. And of course, progressive companies offer stress-reduction training programs and in-house counseling as well as health plans that include psychological therapy.

**Sujansky:** Make it clear to employees that it’s okay for them to tell you when they’re feeling overwhelmed. Reassure them that you won’t view it as a sign of weakness or incompetence. Be available to discuss prioritizing of projects. Often, deadlines can be re-arranged, but only by the leader. Look for tasks that can be temporarily or permanently reassigned to someone else if there is a real overload. Figure out if any of the work could be handled in another way. Could it be automated or outsourced? What about a temp? **TD**

**Michael Laff** is an associate editor for *T+D*; mlaff@astd.org.



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