

# Running faster just to fall further behind

By Stephen Franklin

**S**AY, YOU GOT A MINUTE?

That's OK. Nowadays, nobody seems to have any.

You can tell by the glum faces of the folks gobbling lunch at their desks, the ones morosely leaning against the coffee machine wondering how to get everything done by tonight, the walking workplace wounded, the folks who sit strangely hushed as they ride home, bone-tired, soul deflated, job not done, more of the same on the horizon.

You can hear it in the sigh of someone who has just been handed an assignment by a boss who has already piled on an unrealistic amount of work.

If there's a whine that unites individual American workers, a breed that rarely finds reason to come together for a common cause, it is that time is truly not on their side.

Indeed, one basic truth about the American workplace is the tie that binds the breathless, fledgling hire with her savvy, middle-age, midlevel boss—who never goes home on time:

## TIME CLOCK: Stress rises with hours on the job

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They haven't worked as hard in years, been as tired, or felt as dissatisfied by it all.

With the economy stuck in a job-eating recession, American workers worry today about having a paycheck tomorrow. They worry whether they will have a pension that matters. And they worry about whether their stocks will ever bounce back. But amid all of those worries, they fret day and night about getting the job done.

Their time-clock woes overwhelm them because they are doing the work once performed by employees who were let go in cost-cutting moves; because company executives grossly inflated the mountain of work their staff could do in order to meet faulty projections or Wall Street expectations; or because

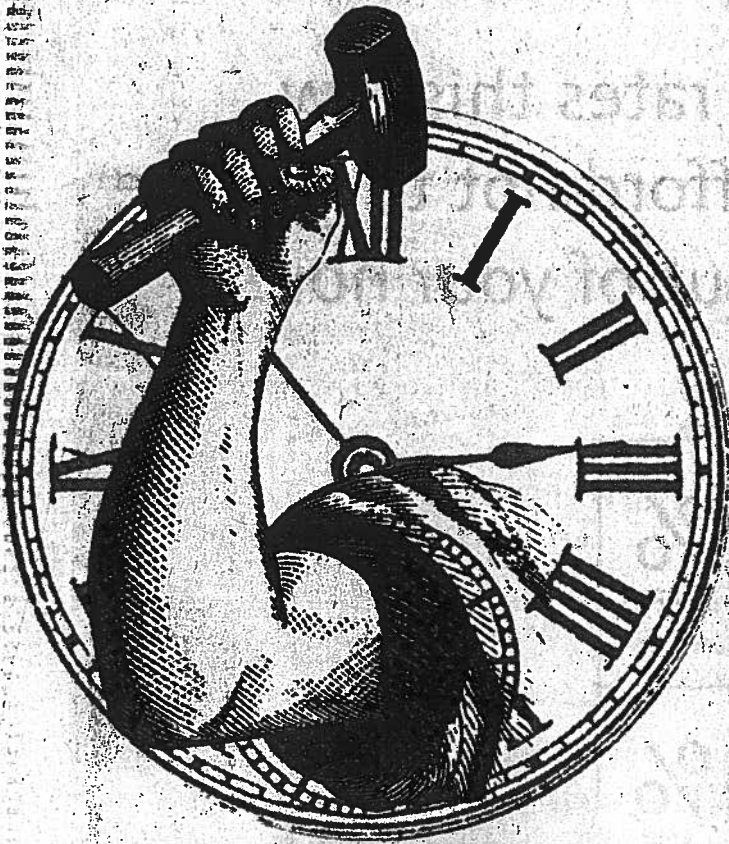
whoever runs the place is deaf to the complaints from the workers under them.

It is also easy to understand why some workers knowingly hand over their lives to their jobs. They feel out of sorts, and out of synch. The job, the company, the economy is not what it used to be, and so they work on, hoping to re-create that time when work mattered, when it satisfied them. And, failing that, they work to survive.

Once American companies dumped workers en masse in bad times. Now, they do it even in good times. Though the economy was steaming along between 1999 and 2001, permanent layoffs surged in the U.S., according to a recent report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The message was simple: Corporations have become serial anorexics, cutting the workforce on the heels of a stock market downdraft, a new technology, or a need to find different kinds of workers. The reasons don't always make good business sense.

By pressuring managers to keep labor costs down, some companies have become co-conspirators in a national effort to



Tribune illustration

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—Lynn Franco, director, Conference Board's Consumer Research Center

work off the clock, to work before and after the shift, to do the job without getting paid for it.

Others have discovered how easy it is to do away with the concept of a loyal, permanent, 9-to-5 workforce. They prefer a virtual workforce, relying on temporaries for more than temporary situations, or day hires, a job category that now runs from lowly paid construction workers to highly paid TV news reporters.

All of these dizzying changes have had an impact.

Among a number of surveys that have charted the American workers' malaise, a recent poll conducted by the Conference Board, a not-for-profit business group, shows that less than half of American workers today are satisfied with their jobs, down from 59 percent seven years ago.

The decline in workers' good feelings about their jobs took place across the board, among white collar and blue, across all

age groups, according to the survey. But the biggest slump occurred among workers between the ages of 35 and 44, a group that had once scored the highest on the organization's job satisfaction surveys. Their job satisfaction rate plummeted from 60 to 47 percent.

Why is the grumping so widespread?

Flat wages? Pay cuts? Deep fears about an evaporating economy?

All of these worries add up to an infernal headache, according to Lynn Franco, director of the Conference Board's Consumer Research Center. But she suggests that workers' concerns about the time crunch plays a big role in their unhappiness.

"We are working in a new environment," she says. "You see a blurring of the 9-to-5 lines. It has become more 24/7," she explains.

And so, with more work, less time to do it, and more workers going and coming as bottom-line-minded companies treat their payrolls like yo-yos, workers' stress levels inch higher.

Yet while American workers have been bemoaning the time theft they have suffered on the job, their complaints do not seem to have had much impact on the problem.

American workers are among the few in the industrialized world logging more on-the-job hours annually, rather than fewer, according to figures from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. When the OECD measured workers' hours on the job in 1979, the U.S. was in the middle of the pack.

But by 2000, American workers were the global time-clock champs, having increased their totals while workers in almost every other major industrialized country had reduced theirs, the OECD figures show.

One reason for the boom in job time in the U.S. is the fact that many more wives are working. "The average middle-income, two-parent family now works 660 more hours per year—16 more weeks—than in 1979," according to the latest report on American workers by the Economic Policy Institute, a liberal Washington, D.C.-based

think tank. Another reason is that workers are working longer just to catch up. That was the case for middle-class black and Hispanic families, which had to put in longer hours than white middle-class families in the last two decades to reach the same income status, the Economic Policy Institute's findings show.

Overall, minority and low-income families had put in more hours on the job in the 1980s and 1990s than others, according to the think tank. Low-income Hispanic families, for example, put in 20 percent more time on the job between 1979 and 2000 as compared to a low-income whites, whose hours went up by about 13 percent.

Grant Levitan, a management psychologist with Chicago-based RHR International, has heard the complaints increase from both the bosses and the bossed about too much work and too few hands to do it. He has seen the toll it takes on companies.

He is also convinced that many companies are not insensitive to the burdens they heap on their workers.

"It is a spiral that they get caught on," he explains.

The symptoms of time strain are everywhere.

In company after company, Levitan has found middle managers who turn down promotions they would have leapt at in the past. The explanation is simple: Taking a job higher on the corporate ladder means, in most cases, working 70 hours a week instead of 50, explains Levitan.

"People are basically saying, 'Why would I trade the job I have for that job? I would lose [what] free time I have,'" he says.

He has met workers so overwhelmed by their time demands that they live in a "kind of despair," fearful "of never being able to get off of this merry-go-round," he says.

The despair especially hits those who feel terribly stretched on the job, but are unable to figure what to do about it.

"You either laugh at the absurdity or you ... despair that you can no longer do a quality job, and you have to lower your standards," he says. Some workers decide to struggle on, never acknowledging to their superiors that they are not getting the job done.

But that just leads to the inevitable day they are confronted about the work that isn't getting done, Levitan says.

"That is not a comfortable feeling to take home."

think tank.