

BRINGING HOME THE BACON, NOT TO MENTION THE EGGS: **WOMEN AND WORK STRESS**



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It's time to update our picture of household economics. In 2000, U.S. Census data estimated that 70.1 percent of women between the ages 25 and 54 were working; that's only 10 percent fewer than men. Not only do women in the U.S. serve eggs scrambled, over-easy, sunny-side up, hard-boiled or poached, they also contribute significantly to the household finances. Eggs Benedict, anyone?

It's no wonder research conducted by the Kenexa® High Performance Institute (KHPI) demonstrates that women's stress at work is at elevated levels compared to men. The report is based on an analysis of data drawn from a representative sample of 10,000 U.S. workers surveyed in 2008 through the KHPI WorkTrends™ study, an annual survey of worker opinions.

WHY ARE WOMEN SO STRESSED?

Digging deeper into the data revealed that both men and women report a strong relationship between work/life balance and managing work stress—in other words, stress may not exist in just one sphere or the other, but has a tendency to cross-contaminate. This finding could indicate that we can't flip a switch between work and home. Result: grumpy spouse comes home after that day's project went badly and takes it out on the family around the dinner table. A peaceful coexistence of work and home roles can lessen stress. In addition, some characteristics of work that can lessen stress for both men and women include:

- Doing exciting work they're good at
- Reporting to a respectful manager
- Communicating upward, especially about issues of ethical concerns and idea sharing
- Being paid fairly
- Belonging to a team with enough team members and resources to get the work done well and on time
- Having a clear career path

Different jobs have different stressors, and women and men have a tendency to gravitate toward certain occupations. For our purposes, we looked specifically at knowledge workers, defined here as employees working as individual contributors in a technical or professional capacity. Women in all types of employment, including knowledge work, experience significantly more work stress than their male counterparts and relate more work issues to stress than men. Additional contributors to stress for women included:

- The likelihood or unlikelihood of promotion, rooted in notions of equal opportunity and their organization's diversity policies
- An organizational quality improvement focus
- Fair performance evaluations

The added stressors for women indicate that, on top of the issues that stress men at work, they also are dealing with concepts of fairness and equal opportunity, and looking for clear, quality guidelines to receiving fair performance evaluations.

There are no surprises here. In the WorkTrends data, there are 20 percent fewer female senior and mid-level leaders and 10 percent fewer women supervisors. Previous research has pointed to minority status, increased difficulty among women in getting spousal support and/or an organizational culture that makes it harder for women to progress (Fielden & Cooper, 2002). The glass ceiling certainly still exists, and it appears that fighting to break through the ceiling adds stress to a woman's work environment.

When women are in management positions, we see a larger stress differential emerge: 10 percent more women than men in supervisory positions report having unreasonable amounts of stress, and six percent more women managers report more stress. These data demonstrate that four to five percent fewer women in upper/middle management feel effective in achieving career goals while still meeting personal and family needs.

That's not to say men don't feel stress too. As an aside, in addition to the stressors listed above that both genders suffer, fewer male knowledge workers reported unreasonable amounts of stress if they had confidence in the abilities of senior management. Perhaps due to a higher population of men in production positions, men also demonstrated a stronger relationship between work stress and safety assurances on the job.

BUCK UP OR QUIT

High stress levels matter to individuals, especially when they result in documented health problems such as heart disease or depression. For this reason, putting aside the significant financial burden of increased health insurance costs, organizations should care deeply about the stress levels of their workforce. Prior research conducted in 2008 by KHPI found that stress level at work was a significant driver for employee engagement—and engagement predicts an employee's likelihood of leaving his or her job. Through increased levels of work stress, an organization could be alienating almost one-quarter of its workforce. Twenty-four percent of U.S. workers reported unreasonable amounts of stress, and they could very well take their technical knowledge, political savvy, work systems knowledge, insider information and leadership bench strength—assets in which their organizations had invested heavily over their tenure—straight out the door to a competitor. Only 57 percent (barely over half of the sample) found their stress level reasonable.

Stress Reduction Techniques

While the U.S. economy is shrinking, so is the workforce. Employees are asked to do more with less as organizations tighten belts and bear down in anticipation of slow or negative economic growth. Organizations can mitigate trickle-down

stress without allocating additional resources by implementing the following tactics:

Level the Playing Field for Women; Support Career Pathing for All Employees

- Post standard career paths
- Publish career coaching resources for managers, including an interview guide for a career discovery conversation
- Clear away cultural, logistical or skill-based obstacles to allow internal employee movement
- Measure performance (both “soft skills” and goal accomplishment) accurately and expect managers to hold regular feedback meetings
- Create a high-potential program with clear guidelines for inclusion
- Advertise when equal opportunity goals are met

Management Values

Train existing management and hire new managers who are equipped to be open to feedback from direct reports, value others' contributions and are respectful when giving direction or feedback.

- Reinforce a culture of “no tolerance” when it comes to disrespectful actions, regardless of organizational stress levels. Managers need to contain raw emotion while still emphasizing the importance of a timeline or priority project
- Communicate senior management's mission, plan and high-level results. Make what happens at the top more transparent so employees can trust in the viability of their organization

Emphasize Person-Job Fit

Employees want to like the job and be able to do it well—a fair requirement.

- Focus employee selection and promotion on skill match and internal motivation to do the job well
- Allocate task management and remove obstacles to high performance
- Set goals for which achievement is in the employee's control

Work to Balance Organizational Goals and Team Resources

While hiring more people seems to be the easy answer to some of these challenges (but also the most difficult to attain), organizations should explore all other avenues of elevating resource issues.

- Increase work process efficiencies. Talk to your organizational development practitioner, Six Sigma Black Belt or industrial engineer about mapping core work process and cutting out the redundancies

- Involve workers in setting departmental timelines
- Although timelines might stand, their involvement will increase buy-in. If they feel the timeline is not possible, respect their input
- Establish a process for actively and frequently revisiting and resetting priorities
- Investigate sharing resources, especially technological or logistical resources with another group
- Hold team “stand-up” meetings (meetings which are so short you don’t need to sit down) where employees share their workload for the week and ask for help if necessary. Convene as frequently as necessary—some organizations meet every morning, others once a week
- Delegate evenly, and use projects as training opportunities, so all employees are equally qualified, thereby lessening skill-based constraints in the team
- Minimize travel wherever possible and appropriate. Time on the road constrains resources (not to mention creating a financial burden, with the increasingly high cost of airfare). Employees who are not available are not a resource

Ensure and Advertise Fair Pay

Fairness is a perception, not a reality, and the answer to changing a perception is not necessarily giving out raises. Often, employees perceive unfair pay when in fact their salary is on par with other employees who hold similar jobs. To avoid negative fair-pay issues, an organization can do the following:

- Conduct a confidential salary study using internal HR records. Discover where real inequalities exist. Consider prior work experience, role requirements—such as breadth of decision making and project and people management responsibilities—and performance metrics in your research
- Compare your salaries with external compensation studies and adjust accordingly, accounting for geographical location
- If compensation levels are reasonably standard, make it known to the employee population
- If salaries are inequitable, work to correct the inequalities over time. Announce that annual raises will reflect an effort to reward employees fairly, given specified job descriptions, experience levels and performance. Hire new employees, with compensation levels set according to the new guidelines, and lure highly sought after talent with bonuses rather than salaries. Consider making salary ranges transparent to employees
- Adjust pay guidelines as economic and social factors warrant, and communicate changes to employees ■

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