

A large, semi-transparent image of a woman with a shocked expression, her hands covering her mouth and wide eyes, serves as the background for the central text.

Did you know? Working is bad for you!

What's happening at work & what you can do about it.

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About Positive Change Consulting

We are a consulting and coaching business based in Melbourne Australia focused on helping workplace leaders manage the daily challenges they face in an ever-changing workplace.

We use coaching, mentoring and training strategies to assist in building leadership skill, developing teamwork and improving communication skill:

- Individual Coaching for Leaders – to gain new insights, a different perspective, clarifying direction
- Coaching Skills for Workplace Leaders – skill training to encourage and develop your people
- Coaching Skills for Educational Leaders - skill training to improving learning outcomes through professional collaboration. [Adapted for educators]

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Did you realise that working might actually be bad for you?

Now there's a great deal of evidence to prove that we're working far too long and enduring far too much stress for our own good.

But this is not a case for abandoning work, for retiring to the vegetable patch.

We all have a measure of control over what happens to us; some more than others, although often we need to be reminded of the fact and shown strategies for regaining that control; coaching strategies.

Becoming aware of what's happening around us at work, of what we are doing to contribute to any malaise in ourselves and others, is the first step towards changing the way we do things – if change is needed.

There are great workplaces around. Probably their stories don't make dramatic impact; perhaps there's not the research interest if there's little to change. It takes some effort to find them, but they're out there.

The point is: the creation of a great workplace is a conscious decision and a commitment by the leaders to sustain it by consistently following certain work practices. There's no magic formula.

In this paper we'll focus what is going wrong in workplaces and what you can do at a personal level.

What is happening at work?

Stress, long hours, unpaid overtime, disengaged staff, managers in overload, illness resulting from job stress, a huge burden of costs. This is what's happening; a long list of concerns that surely we have to take seriously.

How do we know this?

Take the research study in 2008 of UK and Australian managers, *Quality of Working Life*¹, a joint project of the Chartered Management Institute in the United Kingdom and supported by the Australian Institute of Management in Melbourne.

It found that 91% managers in both countries employed in full time positions were routinely working more than their contracted hours; more than half believed their long hours were having a detrimental impact on their well being. The symptoms - indigestion and heartburn, constant irritability, sleep loss, becoming angry with others too easily, and difficulty in making decisions; plus, they were having a negative impact on their social activities and on relationships with their individual partners.

Significantly, 45 per cent of those surveyed also felt their productivity in the workplace was disadvantaged by the length of their working week.

“That situation is not sustainable,” said Susan Heron, CEO of the Australian Institute of Management (Vic/Tas). “Organisational performance stops and starts with people. Those organisations that will prosper long-term are those that think creatively to ease the pressure on managers and their staff, improve work life balance and thereby boost the prospects of retaining key employees”.²

The situation has probably worsened since then as a consequence of the global financial situation.

The UK National Work-Stress Network lists a report by Professor Tarani Chandola of Manchester University, which says:

“Since 2009, there has been a sharp rise in job strain and job insecurity, both determinants of work-related stress. Conflict at work, in the form of poor support and bullying, has also increased, as has work-life balance as an issue”.³

The Australia Institute, reporting the results of its 2009 annual survey of Australian workers in *Something for Nothing*⁴, found that a typical full-time employee was working 70 minutes of unpaid overtime a day, equal to 33 eight-hour days per year, or six and a half standard working weeks per year. Its media release was headed “A \$72 billion gift to employers”.

Who works for nothing? Unpaid overtime was more common amongst people who worked a ‘standard’ business workday as opposed to shift work, and among white-collar rather than blue-collar workers.

*“44 per cent of people who work unpaid overtime said it was ‘compulsory’ or ‘expected,’ another 43 per cent said that it was “not expected, but also not discouraged”.*⁷

Twelve months later the situation has not changed. Its 2010 study, *Long time, no see The impact of time poverty on Australian workers*⁵, has found half of those in full-time jobs said they would have liked to work fewer hours and 80 per cent working overtime would prefer not to; while 60 per cent of part-time workers wanted to work more hours. Time poverty: not having enough time to do all the things you want or need to do.

What did the people working long hours say? They often felt rushed or pressed for time; they couldn’t spend time with family or friends; 45% said work had prevented them doing physical exercise; 36% said work had prevented them from eating healthy meals.

“What our survey respondents are telling us is that they're too busy to cook home cooked meals, they don't have time to exercise and, in fact, when they're sick they're more likely to soldier on and go to work than they are to go to the doctor and find out what's wrong”. Richard Denniss, CEO, The Australia Institute. ABC interview, Nov 10, 2010.⁶

The Australian Bureau of Statistics also reports in its *How Australians Use their time* series⁷ that Australians are spending more time working and less time playing, sleeping and eating and drinking than 10 years ago.

“In 2006 Australians slept for an average of five minutes per day less than in 1997. Time spent eating and drinking also decreased by 4 minutes a day to 1 hour 29 minutes”. ABS⁷

Lack of sleep has already been identified a factor in fatigue. In 1998 L.R Hartley in “When night became day in the 20th century”⁸, reported that average sleeping time in the 19th century was 9 ½ hours, in the 20th century at least one hour less.

Increased work hours and stressed out

Not only are we working longer hours, but there’s far more stress associated with work.

The Centre for Work + Life *which has published The Australian Work Life Index [AWALI]*⁹, the results of national surveys of almost 10,000 workers for the past four years, reports that the majority of workers say they are frequently (often or almost always) rushed and pressed for time. Many workers do not work the hours they prefer; many would prefer to work less.

The key findings relevant to this paper:

- The majority of working Australians say that **work – for all its benefits – has negative effects on the rest of life**, creating strain and restricting time they have for themselves, families and friends, and communities.
- **Managerial and professional workers are especially negatively affected with poor work-life scores and long hours of work:** These are the leaders who set the terms of working life for others.
- **Workers in service industries have worse work-life interference:** Workers in industries like health, education, retail, food and accommodation have worse work-life interference.
- **Many workers don’t take a holiday and it matters:** Around six in ten workers stockpile their leave, about the same proportion as in 2002.

“High work-life pressures amongst those who work long hours, who do not work the hours they would prefer, or do not take their holidays, raises issues about the sustainability of the existing workforce and levels of worker well-being into the future.” AWALI⁹

How do we measure job stress?

VicHealth¹⁰, says the job stress process begins with exposure to psychosocial stressors such as time pressure or physical stressors such as noise.

Job stress is measured according to the following factors:

- Job strain - where workers have little control over their job, but are under high pressure to perform
- Organisational justice -the perceived fairness of decision making within the organisation
- Relational justice - perceived fairness and respect accorded to an individual by his or her supervisor
- Plus: job insecurity, low social support at work and effort-reward imbalance.

How does job stress affect us?

Job stress appears to be a substantial contributor to the preventable burdens of cardiovascular disease (CVD) and depression among working Victorians, with up to one-third of CVD in men and up one-third of depression in women attributable to job stress.⁹

The FACTS¹⁰: Job stress and physical health

Studies have linked occupational stress with physiological risk factors for CVD. Risk factors include hypertension and high body weight and CVD outcomes include angina, heart attacks, and coronary heart disease.

The personal costs of long working hours, on health and well being have been clearly linked to lifestyle illnesses such as obesity, alcoholism and cardio-vascular disease.

Other physical health problems linked with job stress include musculoskeletal conditions, immune deficiency disorders and gastrointestinal problems.

The FACTS¹⁰: **Job stress and mental health:**

Psychological ill health, including anxiety, depression and emotional exhaustion, has been linked to a range of psychosocial working conditions, including management style, work overload and pressure, lack of job control and unclear work roles, in many national and international studies.¹⁰

VicHealth's report *Estimating the economic benefits of eliminating job strain as a risk factor for depression*¹¹ found that "job strain", where workers have little control over their job, but who are under high pressure to perform, accounts for 17 per cent of depression in working women and 13 per cent in working men.

- In 2007 the societal cost of depression in employed Australians that is attributable to job strain was estimated at \$730 million over one year and \$11.8 billion over the lifetime of the 2007 population.
- Further, job strain represented only one of several work-related psychosocial hazards. Others that are linked to depression include effort-reward imbalance, injustice at work, job insecurity and bullying.
- Job stress-related outcomes are negative emotional and psychological states and disorders including emotional exhaustion, psychological distress, anxiety and depression.

Links between job stress and mental health have also been established, between longer hours and shiftwork and a greater prevalence of substance abuse, anxiety and depression, headaches and sleep disturbances.¹²

“This report raises questions about the current workplace culture in Australia. We need to develop strategies that can be applied in all workplaces to make them healthier, happier and more productive environments that nurture good health rather than cause ill-health”.
Todd Harper, CEO VicHealth.¹¹

The problem is not confined to Australia

At the ILO international conference on “Implementing Occupational Safety and Health Standards Globally”, Dr. Sameera Al-Tuwajri¹³, Director of the ILO’s Safe Work Programme drew these conclusions about the impact of the global economic and jobs crisis:

“Mental ill-health is on the rise. In Europe, more and more early retirements today are based on mental ill-health. In extreme cases stress can even lead to suicide, and some enterprises are being asked to prepare stress prevention programmes at work. The reasons for this trend include information overload, intensification of work and time pressure, high demands on mobility and flexibility, being constantly “on call” due to mobile phone technology, and last but not least the worry of losing one’s job”.

VicHealth¹⁰, reported job stress was a widespread concern in other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries; and across all employment sectors and occupational levels. In Europe, stress-related problems are the second most commonly reported cause of occupational illness following musculoskeletal complaints. A smaller but significant reported having experienced other adverse psychosocial exposures, including bullying, unwanted sexual attention and acts of violence.

In the UK, stress-related disorders have been estimated to account for up to 60% of absenteeism. In contrast, absence rates are often lower in organisations where people feel they have higher control over their work.¹⁰

Even “presenteeism”, where ill employees still show up for work because they fear for their jobs, but cannot perform effectively owing to their illness, cost the business. The International Labour Organisation estimates the costs to business of ‘presenteeism’ at three times higher than those caused by absenteeism as a result of illness and injuries.¹³

Where to from here?

There's no denying the costs of working: for individuals, for organisations and for society; and workplace changes are needed.

The longer term impact on health, on families and on communities surely cannot be ignored. If you expect your staff to work these hours; if you yourself put in the overtime, now might be the time to change: your mindset, your habits and your expectations of yourself and others.

The problem is of course far larger than can be addressed by one individual, even with management authority. Official reports rightly identify the need for government policy and continuing research on working hours and point to precedents already being set.

There is though a compelling case for each one of us to accept accountability for our own health and sanity - and for the staff we are responsible for.

Like money, time is vital to personal wellbeing. We need enough time to keep healthy, exercise, relax, sleep, develop and maintain relationships—in other words, to live a balanced life.
The Australia Institute.⁵

Workplace leaders are surely in a position to effect some change in their own workplaces as well as for themselves. Managers in coaching programs invariably talk about the value of more flexibility, often to cope with the noise, the interruptions, the demands of open-plan offices. Some possibilities for adjusting workload commitments include:

- Clarifying the expected hours of work
- Monitoring working hours
- Clarifying job responsibilities
- Rationalising work demands
- Investigating the flexible work arrangements available
- Insist on leave being taken – without the threat of termination
- Discussing concerns with colleagues and seek support for any changes
- Modeling sensible work practices.

What's needed is "More supportive first line supervision and workplace cultures that 'walk the talk' of flexibility, workload management, and responsive work patterns over the life-cycle, matter a great deal to improving work-life integration". AWALI.⁹

These strategies, will go some way towards addressing some of the key job stress factors of long working hours without breaks, of fairness, of work/life imbalance.

Next is the challenge of improving workplace culture: the psychosocial working conditions that include management style and the lack of job control. What staff say they want:

- Feedback – positive and constructive so they know how they are tracking
- To be trusted and respected
- To be listened to
- To be encouraged.

'It is important to ensure that workloads are in line with workers' capabilities and resources, jobs are designed to provide meaning/ stimulation/ opportunities for workers to use their skills, workers' roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, opportunities to participate in decisions and actions affecting workers' jobs are provided...'.¹⁵

Research findings by Human Synergistics¹⁴ from a study of 5,560 senior Australian and New Zealand executives, found that they know what needs to be done, know how to lead, know all the latest leadership concepts. And they believe they are doing it.

These leaders claim they are 'encouraging people to strive for excellence, maintain their standards, show trust in others and work together'. They say they want people to 'strive for excellence, set challenging goals, be creative, maintain integrity, be supportive, resolve conflicts constructively and work together effectively. However, they don't do it.

Their staff, 142,500 from Australia and New Zealand, report feeling controlled: forced to find fault, to compete, to adhere to procedures, to avoid blame and shift responsibility to others. They also see their leaders driven by a fear of failure: avoiding difficult decisions, focusing on negatives, strictly following procedures and dealing aggressively with people when confronted with issues they can't avoid. The result: individual satisfaction, motivation and commitment are low for these employees.

Nine Self-Coaching Strategies

As a leader, your first responsibility is to yourself: maintaining your fitness to lead, setting the standard and leading by example. These strategies are ones that other workplace leaders have made commitment to.

They sound easy; in fact they often demand considerable self-control because they are mostly habits you are trying to change.

<p style="text-align: center;">1</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Start tracking your working hours: include the times you login from home to update something you 'forgot to do'. Now assess how much of that time was spent on tasks other people could have done, if you had delegated them.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">2</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Make a list of all the things you would prefer to do at home, with your family, if you hadn't been focused on work. Discuss the situation with them.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">3</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Next Friday, set aside time to review the week past and to plan the following week - include your staff. Plan to not work on one day at the weekend. Why one day? You are trying to change a habit, so just take one step at a time.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">4</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">If you have staff reporting to you, look at their work loads and see if similar strategies can be applied to their loads.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">5</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Make a commitment to delegate tasks to staff: clarify the task and your expectations, discuss resources available and their confidence, negotiate checking-in times to relieve you of worry. Then step back and trust.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">6</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Start asking questions that require solutions or suggestions instead of immediately assuming responsibility for problems. Watch how your staff begin to respond.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">7</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Start giving feedback – even a thank you. You might be surprised by how seldom you do this.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">8</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Involve your staff in seeking more efficient ways of doing things – continuous improvement.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">9</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Celebrate with them when you have achieved a goal, however small.</p>

Now sit back, allow yourself time to reflect, and see how the work gets done without you.

If you've enjoyed reading this paper, you might be interested in one of the services we offer:

- Individual coaching for leaders
- Coaching skills for workplace leaders
- Coaching skills for educational leaders
- Workshops for leadership teams.

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Read **2 Way Feedback**

A practical guide for building a communication culture, in which everyone will want to contribute their best.

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