

Stress less, work friendly

By F. Leigh Branham

"Doing more with less" has taken its toll on the American worker. A Family and Work survey conducted by True Careers reported that 70% of all workers don't think there is a healthy balance between their work lives and their professional lives. A Radcliffe Public Policy Center research study found that 61% of all workers are now willing to sacrifice pay in exchange for more personal and family time. Generation X and Y workers in particular are insistent on more time outside of work to live their lives. They want something their parents didn't have—sanity!

Stress and overwork horror stories from the rank and file are easily typified. For example, there are companies who offer part-time jobs strictly defined as 40 hours per week and numerous accountings of bosses who won't let employees leave meetings early for family emergencies. Or perhaps you heard about the CEO who scheduled a meeting of 80 managers to discuss implementing a life/work balance plan, then held the meeting on a weekend!

People who work in such cultures of abuse and sacrifice often feel like just one more factor of production, like fuel to be burned, instead of a renewable resource. These kinds of employers push their employees to work at a pace that is not sustainable. Instead of doing everything they can to keep their good people, they accept constant turnover as a cost of doing business. They seem to be saying to their employees, "Go ahead—burn yourself out, and then you can leave." As one employee joked, "My Company's version of flex-time is 'work any 18 hours you want.'" The bottom line is workers and employers pay the price in stressful and overworked environments.

The good news is that more employers are waking up and realizing that showing sensitivity to employees' needs actually pays off to the bottom line. When First Horizons Bank allowed some of its branches to adopt flextime, it found that customer retention rates were 7% higher in those offices, and employee retention rates were twice those without flex-time. The SAS Institute in Cary, N.C., saves \$67 million per year in avoided turnover costs by constantly dreaming up new ways to take care of their employees with various initiatives such as: investing big bucks up front in an on-site clinic, providing elder care assistance, a company gym, free meals in the cafeteria, and the list goes on and on. SAS doesn't open the campus gates until 7 a.m. each day and closes them promptly at 6 p.m. The message to their employees is clear: go home, have a good life outside of work, and come back refreshed tomorrow. In the software industry, which averages 20% voluntary turnover, SAS' voluntary turnover rate averages only 3%!

Outback Steakhouses noticed that their rate of returning customers and the retention rate of their wait staff had been continually declining. In analyzing possible causes, Outback's senior leaders realized the solution was simple—reduce the number of tables for which each waiter is responsible from four to three. This meant they would temporarily increase compensation costs, but the change allowed waiters to not be so rushed when dealing with customers, to really listen to them without feeling frazzled, and do the little things that make diners feel well taken care of. As a result, repeat business went up, and staff turnover dropped significantly, thus reducing turnover-related costs and increased profits for the chain.

Small companies are also learning they can compete for talent with larger employers by creating more civilized workplaces. The founders of D3, a small Kansas City marketing communications firm, were determined not to have the same kind of employee burnout they had experienced with their previous employers. They proclaimed regular work hours of 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., insisted their associates take comp time to refresh, go on regular outings to parks and art museums, and have even turned away business when they knew it would

impose an unhealthy workload.

Before your company decides to implement new "workforce friendly" practices, consider the following recommendations:

- Survey the employees to find out what new benefits would help them achieve a healthier balance. Don't just copy what other companies are doing. Tailor new benefits and practices to the needs of workers, such as flex-schedules and job-sharing for parents with school-age children, free cell phones for on-call employees, or on-site massages in workplaces with particularly high stress levels.

- Before implementing any new work-life practice, a cross-section of interested employees should be involved in considering the practical aspects of how it would be. If implemented, consider the possible perceived inequities and how they would be resolved, have an impact on customer service, and weigh the cost vs. return on investment.

If you want to help your company feed its bottom line by enhancing workforce sustainability you can begin by accessing the resources of the following organizations on the web:

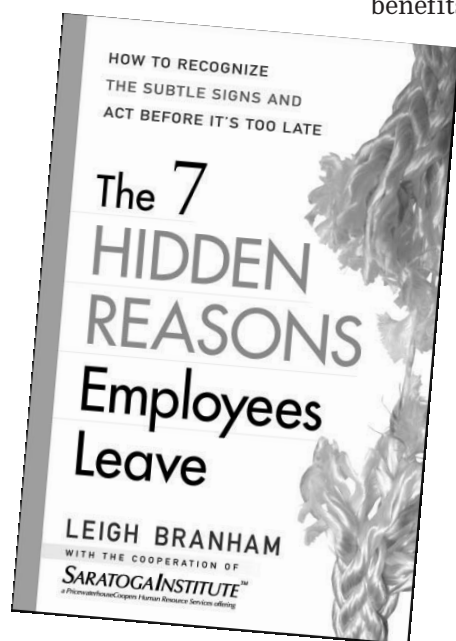
The Families and Work Institute is a nonprofit

center dedicated to providing research for living in a changing workplace. Visit: <http://www.familiesandwork.org/>

Alliance for Work-Life Progress is a global network of professionals committed to advancing work-life effectiveness. Founded in 1996, AWLP® facilitates work-life thought leadership, research and practical strategies to influence better integration of work, family and community. AWLP is part of WorldatWork (www.worldatwork.org), the total rewards association.

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) is the world's largest association devoted to human resource management. Visit: <http://search.shrm.org/search?q=work+life+balance>

Leigh Branham is the author of Keeping the People Who Keep You in Business: 24 Ways to Hang On to Your Most Valuable Talent (AMACOM, 2001), which consistently ranks on Amazon.com as one of the best-selling books on employee retention. His newest book, The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave: How to Recognize the Subtle Signs and Act Before It's Too Late (AMACOM Books, 2005), was based on his analysis of 19,700 surveys of employees who quit their jobs between 1998 and 2003. Branham speaks frequently on topics related to employee engagement and retention and travels to Chicago often to work with Stromberg Consulting, a firm which specializes in helping organizations achieve peak performance through organizational behavior change. Leigh can be reached by email at LB@keepingthepeople.com, or by visiting his website: www.keepingthepeople.com. -CWM



Geek Tweak WiFi? We'll tell you.

Entrepreneur.com reports that roughly 228,000 small businesses use a wireless network. Wireless networks are becoming a near necessity for anyone with a computer and a broadband connection. Connectivity has reached such a degree of importance that local governments are getting involved, with many cities working to deploy citywide WiFi networks -- allowing people to surf the Web from any open space. Just like how we are able to pick up radio station in our cars, similarly, our computers can pick up these "wireless data" signals from antennas being broadcasted throughout the city. With that in mind, when you wander too far from the antenna the signal becomes weak, therefore, you might lose connectivity. From Fortune 500 companies to a one-person home office, businesses can benefit from un-tethering the Internet with a WiFi network.

The site also states that growing amounts of small businesses which have already adopted a wireless solution are reporting immediate paybacks in higher productivity, flexible application mobility, and greater worker satisfaction. Whether you've got a single PC or multiple laptops, a WiFi-enabled office allows you to get online anywhere, anytime.

A WiFi-enabled office will allow users to escape from the single desk atmosphere. You can move throughout your office without losing your connection. In addition, you can create a VPN (Virtual Private Network) and be able to virtually sit at your desk from anywhere in the world. Most new laptops and desktops have built-in WiFi, but if your computer is a slightly older model, quick and cost-effective upgrades are available.

Wireless technology has evolved enough where converting to a wireless network is now cheaper than ever. To set up a business network the proper hardware and software must be put in place. Here are a few things to keep in mind when considering wireless options:

* **Reduce Costs.** For small business owners in particular, keeping expenses low is key. A wireless network eliminates that time and, more importantly, the expense of gutting walls and running wires.

* **Make the Bedroom the Boardroom.** For many budding entrepreneurs, the home and the business are one in the same. By installing a wireless network, it's easy to turn a spare bedroom into an office (and back again in a pinch), or move out of the living room and into the basement when the kids get home from school.

* **Expand flexibility.** Wireless technology allows you to expand your network with the flexibility to move hardware around or out of the office without having to run additional cables. For example, multiple computers and printers can share the same broadband internet** hassle-free. Going wireless is an affordable and effortless way to extend connectivity -- no wires!

**Broadband internet is better described as a "high-speed" connection directly to the internet.

If you regularly expand or reorganize your office space, or need to accommodate a variety of network configurations, the rapid transition time from one configuration to another that wireless provides can help reduce your network downtime.

* **Extend your mobility.** With a limited number of employees, small businesses have a need to be mobile. Wireless technology extends information and applications to wherever you or your employees need it, increasing efficiency and productivity. Travel between office, job sites and home is easily integrated with the ability to access the company network. That coffee shop you stopped in on the road? It just became your West Coast office.

* **Share with your colleagues.** It's easy to get additional storage or share files among different computers in the office, as you can connect a network storage drive directly to your wireless router. A network drive allows you to back up data (e.g. documents and images) that you want to share with other computers in your network. Some network storage drives will even allow you to access your files from the Internet on any computer. Creating VPN's (Virtual Private Network) will allow you to securely connect to other encrypted networks to share different resources, such as, documents, pictures, printers, etc.



**Yours in Geekdom,
The Squad**