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 White Collar Sweatshop

Sweatshop workers are exploited, often illiterate, impoverished, powerless. The United States' white-collar workers are certainly anything but. They're educated, sometimes very well educated. They enjoy comfortable lifestyles, often extremely comfortable lifestyles. They've got plenty of options. Could they really have anything to complain about, especially during an economic period as vibrant as these past years have been?

Then again, for many of the readers of this book, especially those who work in large and demanding corporate environments, the term "sweatshop" may not seem so surprising at all. For them, the more pressing question may be, is there a way out of our contemporary business culture of overwork, stress, insecurity, and under-reward—both for themselves as individuals and for the nation at large?

"The Pace Was Insane":

Less Time, More Stress

"**T**he whole theme of your book is my life," one IBM veteran in her early forties told me during the first of a series of conversations we shared.

Catherine described to me her steady progression from a junior position at "Big Blue" back in the early 1980s through a fairly continual string of promotions into the ranks of management during the next decade. Early on, she had been identified as a strong performer and, as she put it, "placed on the management fast track." While still in her twenties, she worked twenty-hour days. "It was pretty unbelievable" is the way she recalls it now.

One two-year assignment kept her on the road, visiting IBM's customers, five days a week. "I'd only go home on the weekends. That was just accepted. It was part of the culture. You just did it—kept working and traveling at that kind of pace." Since her husband also worked for the company, he didn't complain; fortunately, his travel schedule was lighter than hers, which allowed them to maintain a semblance of a home life.

Then she was promoted into a line-management position. The good news was, she was on her way up and no longer needed to maintain that relentless travel schedule. The bad news was, her responsibilities included a regular rotation during which she was placed "on call" twenty-four hours a day, on a shift that lasted a week at a time.

To an outsider looking in, what was perhaps most remarkable about Catherine's work and home life was just how unremarkable it all seemed to her and her colleagues. "A customer could get in touch with me anytime. If you were on call, that meant you were their first point of contact." She paused, then added, "At two o'clock in the morning, you would get calls from a customer. But you were still expected to be in the office by 8 A.M. I did it for two years. I'd come home at eight or nine at night. In the midst of that, I had my first back operation. The pace was insane. When you'd get home, you'd go for the wine. And then, pretty much crash and go to sleep."

Although the working conditions were brutal, Catherine never contemplated complaining or switching to another employer. "This was known as a job you had to do to 'get your ticket punched,'" she explained. Little wonder she wanted it punched: this was still the 1980s, when a management job at IBM was the pot of gold at the end of many a white-collar rainbow, thanks to the company's longtime domination of the mainframe computer business, unflaggingly powerful stock performance, and well-earned reputation as a blue-chip provider of employee benefits and incentives.

Then the competitive arena shifted, and IBM's market preeminence (as well as the dominance of mainframes) was challenged by the growing popularity of personal computers. Its stock price began a long downhill slide, various corporate reorganizations were announced, and finally, in 1993, Louis Gerstner, a veteran of the RJR Nabisco restructuring, took the helm with a mandate for change. For Catherine and her colleagues, the demands of their already difficult jobs were notched up several levels as the company gradually entered a crisis management mode. As they worked harder and harder, many of the benefits they had prized most dearly during their days at Big Blue started slipping away. For one thing, "we used to get one hundred percent medical coverage," she recalled. "Then they switched married couples to coordinated benefits, then they switched us to an HMO. It was just, holy s---!" Worst of all was the damage done by the company's falling stock price, which went from a high around 170 to a low in the 40s; that downward trajectory drastically reduced, among other things, the value of many

employees' retirement savings, traditionally one of the biggest benefits of life as one of IBM's "blue suits."

Workloads kept increasing, as the company announced numerous early-retirement initiatives and then layoffs, driving its workforce down from a high of over four hundred thousand to the low two hundred thousands. "It began to trickle down that you had this pace of work and meetings during the day. You couldn't get to your e-mails during the day, so you'd do them at night." Catherine's laugh was bitter. "It was like you didn't have a home life. IBM gave you a computer at home. That made it easy to work." Again the laugh. "I used to pride myself on thinking, I'm not going to complain. I can take it all on. I can do anything."

In the hours Catherine spent describing her grueling working conditions to me—as I came to understand the ways that work had enveloped just about every aspect of her personal life since she first entered the corporate arena back in her early twenties—I kept asking her, and myself, why she had stayed on at IBM, especially as the company began shedding its paternalistic practices and cutting back on the once-traditional rewards for all that hard labor.

Our conversations illuminated several points. She accepted her workload in large part because it was the norm within the corporation: as it increased for her, it increased for her colleagues, too, which meant that it still seemed within the bounds of the acceptable. Also, Catherine was emotionally attached to her employer, identifying with both its successes and failures, in a way that encouraged her to hang on, despite the difficulties of her position.¹ Finally, although certainly not of least importance, she was a success at IBM and had been for some years now. As she continued to rise within the corporate hierarchy, to build her own network of mentors, colleagues, and friends within the organization—to spend most of her waking hours thinking about IBM, working for IBM, *being* at IBM—it was tough to imagine turning her back on so many years of accumulated experiences and ties.

The demands of her job still took their toll. There were two more back operations for Catherine, and more and more problems with her husband, during those few hours they managed to spend together away from the office. By this time, the couple had been trying

unsuccessfully to get pregnant for years. Catherine blamed their failure on her chronic exhaustion and job-related stress; the cause also, she was convinced, of her incessant back ailment.

By this time, she was working sixteen-hour days at the office, then going home to check—among other tasks—her e-mails and voice-mail messages. Her travel pace had picked up again as well.

"My husband was traveling then, too. We'd do what we called 'calendar coordination' every two weeks," she told me. "We'd sit down at dinner and plan for every single day. Where would he be and where would I be?" Worn out by a pace of work that she had been maintaining for more than a decade, she decided a few years ago to join a health club, naturally choosing one that was open twenty-four hours a day. "I'd try to go at ten o'clock at night, after I left the office."

Longer Workdays

Experiences like Catherine's reflect seismic changes that have taken place within corporate America during the past two decades, most especially during the 1990s, in respect to the rules, the rewards, and the demands of work. This shift is equivalent to an industrial revolution for white-collar workers who, by necessity, have learned to adjust to (and often successfully function within) whatever versions of the white-collar "sweatshop" have evolved within their own companies and industries.

People are working longer and harder, the kind of hours one once might have expected to see logged in only by chief executives or would-be CEOs (or sweatshop workers!). There may be no greater testament to this reality than the best-selling success of Juliet Schor's *The Overworked American*, which argued, "If present trends continue, by the end of the century Americans will be spending as much time at their jobs as they did back in the nineteen twenties."²

Currently, over 25 million Americans work more than forty-nine hours each week, some a good bit more. Here's how those numbers break down: Nearly 12 percent of the workforce, about 15 million people, report spending forty-nine to fifty-nine hours weekly at the office; another 11 million, or 8.5 percent, say they spend sixty hours

or more there.³ Most of these people are white-collar professionals: among them, corporate managers, marketing staffers, investment bankers, office administrators, software designers, lawyers, editors, engineers, accountants, business consultants, and the secretaries, word processors, computer programmers, and back-office clerks who support their activities.

Most people, of course, don't spend sixteen or so hours a day at their offices, at least not on a regular basis, year after year. They might not be able to relate to all the career successes Catherine has had along the way. Odds are pretty strong as well that they haven't lived through the painful medical procedures she has; indeed, it might not be so simple to draw a straight line between their work-related stresses and whatever problems have emerged within their personal lives.

But Catherine is far from unique when it comes to the back-breaking pace of her work life. "Men and women come in all the time, begging for help, more and more stressed out," Zoe confided. A mid-level manager at Levi Strauss, she had worked her way through layoffs and cutbacks during the 1990s. She told me, as she laughed, that she had been with the company so long that she remembered a time when it was still thought of as a good place to work. But no longer, she emphasized, adding, "I'd say the average person is now doing the job of two and a half people."

At workplaces across the nation, most people working more than forty hours each week are between twenty-five and forty-four years old.⁴ A good many of them are likely to be juggling the intense demands of these job schedules with the also intense demands of a family, which may include responsibilities for aging parents, as well as spouses and children.

Manny is a good example. He was a technical writer at Intel and, also, the single father of two elementary-school-age girls. "Nominally, Intel has work hours, usually eight to five," he told me. But "life at Intel is intense . . . incredibly hard work." So he evolved his own strategy to cope: "I'd get the kids up, give them breakfast, then I'd take off. Get there about seven in the morning. Usually I'd leave right at five." He'd come home to prepare dinner and eat it with his daughters. "Then I'd put them to bed at eight," leaving them at

home alone, he explained, "and come back to the office until about 1 A.M."

In some industries, among them the technology and financial services sectors, the norms—everyday expectations about just how much time people should spend at the office each day—have become so extreme that a twelve-hour workday can seem positively lightweight. As the culture of overwork spread across the United States, inflexibly high demands like these began to seem like a badge of honor, at least from the business world's perspective. Lexus, the car manufacturer, ran advertisements that boasted, "Sure, We Take Vacations. They're Called Lunch Breaks," and "We Don't Have a Company Softball Team. It Would Lower Productivity by .56%."⁵

Newcomers who try to leave such workplaces early, maybe to get home in time to have dinner with their families, must either adapt to the rigors of the daily routine or risk the loss of their jobs. "I see a lot of people who have a hard time understanding families and family pressures," one public relations executive in his mid-thirties confided to me. With a career that has already encompassed three different mergers at three financial corporations and one merger-related layoff, Marc has drawn a drastic, if perhaps understandable, conclusion from his workplace observations: "I personally feel that having a family is not necessarily a good thing."

In industries like his, where white-collar workers can typically spend seventy, eighty, ninety hours a week, or even more, in their offices, machismo attitudes surface—especially in group situations—when people describe just how long and how hard they work. (Remember Catherine's sense of pride about "never complaining"?!) When Harvard Business School professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter ran focus groups with about three hundred professionals working in the software industry, she was told about an "ethic that is far and above 8-to-5." Black humor abounded: "Only a half-day!" "That's 8 p.m. to 5 p.m." "This is like a poker game. I'll see you your hours and raise you." Another person explained, "The long hours aren't because we want to outshine everybody; we want to keep up with everybody."⁶

This pace of work is physically and emotionally draining, however, whether or not people choose to complain about it to their friends, relatives, or colleagues. Robert, a thirty-two-year-old financial executive at American Express, described his working conditions to me this way: "I don't get home until nine-thirty some nights. I'm dead tired ninety percent of the time. I think it's slowly sinking in with my wife about the idea that we're going to have to do something with Robert's life."

Two paychecks means twice as much potential for overwork and exhaustion, with just that much less time left over for child-rearing and other priorities. One recent study of multidecade work patterns among two-career couples concluded, in the words of Marin Clarkberg, a Cornell University sociologist, "People are working longer hours, and it's not because they want to." Among the study's findings: 43 percent of husbands and 34 percent of wives reported working more hours than they would like.⁷

What keeps people in their offices all these hours? One would assume—especially in a tight labor market—that the big difference between today's educated and empowered white-collar workers and the sweatshop seamstress would be the former's freedom to "just say no": to refuse to punch these round-the-clock time cards and instead insist upon a humane pace of work.

The explanation is as complex as the corporate world. Some people don't have the clout or the outside options to permit them to strive for more balanced schedules and workloads. Some industries effectively squash resistance early on by expecting their managers to train early recruits to accept (and even expect) excessive demands upon their time. On Wall Street, for example, it is common for a supervisor to instruct new hires to keep a spare set of clothes and toothbrush in the office for all those late night work episodes when it just won't make sense to head home for a quick snooze. Managers like these quickly impose their company's demanding work schedules upon their staffers' psyches and work habits, since they themselves put in extra long hours and can easily identify "slackers."

There are other ways, of course, to make certain that white-collar men and women meet their employers' tough standards. Legal con-

sulting, and accounting firms track numbers of billable hours, which has always made it simple for them to identify those professionals who fail to work long enough and bring in whatever levels of revenue currently seem adequate. With the development of new software products, other companies have the option—whether they choose to take advantage of it or not—of using personal computers to track the in-office productivity of all kinds of staffers.

As many people rise within their organizations, there's no need for the corporation to impose work-hour guidelines or track time spent at their desks. Their workloads are so heavy that they have no choice but to spend long hours there. If they want to hold on to their paychecks and benefit packages, if they want to keep rising within the corporate hierarchy, if they still care about their careers, they will put in whatever hours are necessary to handle their workloads. And they require neither timekeepers nor shop-floor supervisors to crack the whip, since they will self-impose whatever work schedule—nine-to-nine, six-to-eight (meaning A.M. to P.M., of course), or well into the morning hours—is necessary to get the job done.

Job Spill

One of the most insidious features of today's white-collar "sweatshop" is the way that increased work time and job demands get disguised, since many work-related activities take place in the ever more blurry terrain between life inside and outside the office.

Remember lunch hours? The very term has become an anachronism for many inhabitants of the corporate world. Thirty-nine percent of workers surveyed by the National Restaurant Association report that they are too busy to take a lunch break . . . they just work through it. Another 45 percent complain that they have less time for lunch than they used to have. While it's tough to tell exactly how much less—two recent surveys concluded that the sixty-minute lunch break has shrunk to either thirty-six or twenty-nine minutes—one conclusion is clear: we're gulping down our sandwiches quicker so that we can speed our way back to work.⁸

In Manhattan, for example, where "power lunches" have traditionally been a way of life (and integral to the publishing, entertainment, fashion, legal, and other industries), tony restaurants

such as Le Bernardin now offer thirty-minute quickies for working men and women who are too pressed for time to ingest their gourmet meals at a leisurely pace. The latest trend among rising professionals? They schedule two or more mini-meals, with one set of business guests arriving at the table as another departs: "There's no foreplay to lunch anymore," one confided.⁹

The daily commute has also changed. For many men and women, the hours they spend in their cars or on trains getting to and from their offices used to include precious and uninterrupted moments of quiet which they now use, not for personal relaxation, but to return work-related phone calls they were too busy to respond to during the workday. When they get a free moment, or maybe get stalled in traffic, they check voice mail back at the office for new messages. Odds are, they don't even think of this activity as work, for many, it's just catch-up time. They might even blame themselves for being too disorganized or inefficient at the office to get done everything they need to do.

All those people in all those cars, however, with one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the cell phone, are part of a larger trend that has little to do with their personal efficiency. In most cases, after all, they'll have just as many phone calls to return during tomorrow's commute as they do today, even if they manage to catch up on all of them now. For lack of a better term, think of the cause as job "spill," like an oil spill. Then imagine job tasks seeping from the office to the home in much the same way as oil can invade a body of water and a beach. The seepage is just as difficult to block. And it's the dirty secret behind many a corporation's thriving bottom line.

Job spill encroaches upon far more than commuting time. Like Catherine, many of the people who write memos during their train rides home or return phone calls from the highway are the same ones who then proceed to check their e-mails and voice-mail messages after dinner: sometimes several times after dinner and sometimes for quite a long time after dinner. Their nighttime reading material might well be a project update or a stack of memos from colleagues, or a book they're editing, or an investment prospectus they're writing. As with commuting, they usually don't tote this up

as additional time spent after an already long workday, although of course it is.

People try to minimize the disruption of their home life by playing their own equivalent of the commuter “catch-up” game: they tell themselves that by working at home during the evening, they’re making their lives “easier” at the office tomorrow. Of course, they need to tell themselves the same thing when faced with tomorrow’s job spill. Or, they can try not to think too much about it, after all, that’s just “the way things are.”

Job spill also seeps into the weekend. Although there always were some people—mainly go-getters on the rise and plain old workaholics—who brought office work home with them to do on Saturday and Sunday, the weekend has typically been an inviolate private space, a chance to unwind and get together with relatives or friends or simply relax. As Witold Rybczynski put it in *Waiting for the Weekend*, “It’s a time apart from the world of mundane problems and mundane concerns, from the world of making a living. On weekends time stands still, and not only because we take off our watches.”¹⁰

No longer. For many men and women, the pace of work is so intense and unrelenting that they simply cannot squirrel away the time to take off their watches and forget about their offices all weekend long. “I had no hobbies, no outside interests,” recalled Patricia, one of a small group of female engineers at one of the nation’s most prestigious (and demanding) high-tech giants. “I believe that the divorce rate at these very aggressive companies must be higher than the norm. If you make the choice to have a home life, your career will suffer. You’ve got to be willing to work the endless hours, come in on weekends, travel to the ends of the earth.”

Weekend work is now just unavoidable for a good number of white-collar staffers. Electronic mail has fueled the trend in making it both easier for people to contact their colleagues and more difficult for colleagues to fail to respond (and respond quickly). People are fortunate who can squeeze their weekend work in along with other activities, confine it to only Saturday or Sunday, or limit it to a couple of weekends each month.

There are countless subtle, but significant, signs of the invasion of the office into the once-inviolate weekend. FedEx, for example, launched a Sunday delivery service to a series of select U.S. zip code destinations in order to serve a customer base in which “more and more businesses were operating on Sunday . . . [or] were faced with either the occasional situation or the demanding customer who needed things on what was once an impossible deadline.”¹¹ Bill, a longtime public relations executive, pointed out to me that more and more press conferences and news releases are being scheduled for Sunday. “It’s a subtle breakdown of the old rules,” he commented. “Maybe next we’ll see these announcements coming out on Christmas. Hell, that’s only another Wednesday or Thursday or whatever!”

Weekend work can take many different forms, running the gamut from a briefcase full of papers that will demand hours of reading and response time at one’s home “office,” to cell phone calls that interrupt a Sunday jitney ride back from the Hamptons, to beeper alerts that summon a mother or father away from a child’s baseball game. The low point, at least with regard to weekend work, came for Marc one Saturday morning when he was wheeling his toddler daughter in a stroller to a local delicatessen for a breakfast alone.

“There we were in the mall and my beeper goes off.” He paused in anger, as if he were still hearing it ring. “Here I am. My daughter deserves my attention, *but* all of a sudden Marc is a husband, a father, and a manager, all at the same time.” He paused again, then added, “But that’s not right, because when I’m at the office, they don’t want to hear that I’m also Marc a father and Marc a husband.”

Whether weekend work takes place at a shopping mall (or some other extension of one’s home turf) or at the office generally depends upon the norms for each person’s industry and particular company. Parking lots may be as much as half full at a high-tech company like Microsoft on a Saturday or Sunday, and it’s easy to tell what that signifies: more people working more hours. (Manny reported to me that he used to “sneak [his] daughters in below the security cameras,” when he worked weekends at Intel, because he was so desperate to spend time with them, even if only at the office.)

On the other hand, the cubicles and hallways may be empty at a publishing company like HarperCollins during the weekend. But that doesn't mean its editors aren't blue-lining manuscripts from their desks or dining room tables at home, or performing other tasks they are simply too busy to handle during their workweek.

Less Time to Unwind

"You are being asked to work weekends," complained Robert, the financial executive from American Express. "You have to travel. People don't consider it an acceptable excuse to say, 'I'm burned out and I need to spend time with my family.' People do keep mental notes. You see it in their faces."

Few people possess the valuable ability to shut work out of their personal lives, at least for a long enough period to unwind from the intense job schedules they must cope with seven days a week. Since weekends scarcely provide relief for many overloaded men and women, vacations and holidays loom ever more important as an opportunity to restore balance. Yet these too are under siege in the white-collar "sweatshop," both from cost-cutting corporations and from the ever-present job spill.

In *The Overworked American*, Juliet Schor concluded that during the 1980s "U.S. workers have gotten less time off—on the order of three and a half fewer days each year of vacation time, holidays, sick pay, and other paid absences." She added, "This decline is even more striking in that it reverses thirty years of progress in terms of paid time off." Symptomatic of the corporate trend was DuPont's decision to reduce the highest-paid vacation level for employees from seven to four weeks, while also eliminating three company-wide holidays from its annual calendar.¹²

With less time off (and jobs whose demands may be such that getting-away-from-it-all for two weeks is virtually impossible), quickie vacations have become increasingly popular. According to the Travel Industry Association of America, weekend vacations now represent more than half of all U.S. travel.

Even a weekend off is more time than some people can now steal away from their workplaces. So a new trend has evolved: twenty-four-hour vacations, which may take the form of overnights at a

nearby hotel or spa. (Others manage to cram in round-trip airline flights, boat cruises, or some other type of long-distance conveyance that provides at least the illusion of a full-scale respite from work.) The *Wall Street Journal* termed such vacationers "deadline tourists,"¹³ suggesting a heart-pounding compression of time that merely mirrors the intensity of their work and home lives.

Most people still cling to the more traditional forms of vacation (including enough time to work on a suntan or overcome jetlag). But a fair number bring along with them their laptops, portable fax machines, or electronic organizers, no matter how far from the office they go. They're the ones we all see who are speaking to their offices or their clients from cellular phones on the beach or the fishing boat. Intrusions like these from the workplace can even seem funny, so long as they're not happening to you or me. That was the way I felt when one thirty-something Wall Streeter described the time her cellular phone rang during a crowded train ride to her rented beach house in the Hamptons. Everyone within her sight range on the train checked his or her own phone; all were carrying them, in briefcases or handbags, as a matter of course.

Like all those men and women who squeeze work time into their commutes or evenings with the family, working vacationers may tell themselves that a little (or a lot) of work isn't really too bad, so long as it can be done *during* a stay at the beach or a trendy resort. How painful can it be to check one's voice mail, after all, if one can do it while watching the kids play beach volleyball or perfecting a suntan?

People who pacify themselves this way fail to appreciate that any work at all defeats the goal of a vacation, which is to restore one's sense of personal balance, enjoyment in life, and independence from the office. They cannot unwind, not really. The sad thing is, many people have basically accepted that this, too, is "the way things are."

Too Much Stress

Corporate America has always been a demanding place. For large numbers of men and women, however, the traditional demand-and-reward equation that has governed work life within the nation's

largest companies no longer adds up. And that's true whether they're earning \$30,000 a year or multiples more.

What's tipped the balance for many corporate staffers is the way that increased work time and job spill (with reduced opportunities to relax and recover) has contributed to stress loads so overwhelming that "job stress" and "personal stress" seem inextricably connected and inescapable. The personal toll can be overwhelming. Manny, the single father from Intel, confided to me, "Sometimes I would crash. A crash would mean I'd sit there and stare at the computer—couldn't move, couldn't hear anything. One time, I got a warning from my supervisor."

Many people find themselves pushed close to their own versions of Manny's "crash." International Survey Research Corporation, a Chicago-based opinion research firm, found that 44 percent of employees surveyed from a variety of corporations believe that their workloads are "excessive." (That percentage rose in six of the seven years surveyed, from a low of 37 percent in 1988.) Nearly as many people report that they are often bothered by excessive job pressures.¹⁴

Just think about it for a moment. People are working ten or twelve or more hours a day. They're working through their lunch hours, during their commutes to and from the office, in squeezed-in spare moments during their evening hours, and whenever else they absolutely need to on weekends and holidays. And many of them still feel that they cannot keep up, that their workloads are excessive.

When the American Management Association conducted an overnight fax survey of its members to explore what it called "the emotionally charged workplace," its results were disturbing. Fifty-one percent of those surveyed cited "frustration" and 49.4 percent "stress" in response to a question about which emotions best described their feelings throughout the workday. The problem of "having more to do than time to do it" ranked highest on a five-point scale that measured respondents' intensity of feelings.¹⁵

The National Center for Health Statistics, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, tracked forty thousand

workers to learn that more than half reported feeling either a lot or a moderate amount of stress during the two weeks prior to the survey. In the majority of instances, that stress was work-related.¹⁶ Clearly, the problem abounds. More than 40 percent of professional and clerical workers surveyed by Gallup complained about stress on a daily or almost daily level. Business and sales staffers reported comparable loads.¹⁷

Unlike hours spent in the office or productivity demands, stress is difficult to quantify. But a person knows it when he or she feels it—and, as I came to discover during my research, one also knows it when one hears it. I heard it in Jerome's voice when he and I met for a rushed lunch on Wall Street to discuss his career.

During more than twenty years in the marketing departments of major banks, including Citibank and Marine Midland, Jerome had worked his way through numerous corporate reorganizations and mergers, surviving some and losing his job after another. In his current position, he was earning less than he had earned five years earlier but was working harder, without any promotion opportunities in sight.

Jerome was plagued by the memory of the time, a few years ago, when he had failed to follow up on a headhunter's telephone call: after all, that job might have taken him to a better place and position than the spot where he has ended up. With a son graduating from high school that coming June, he confessed that worries about college tuition were never far from his mind. It would be difficult enough to handle those bills at his current salary, but what if he somehow lost his job again? He had learned the hard way that you couldn't count on anything in the corporate world.

All this added up to stress: stress that was apparent in the angry, clipped tones he used during our conversation and the way that his fingers kept banging the table to punctuate his points. "How long can they tighten the screws on people?" he asked me. Then he answered his own question. "As long as people take it. But they take it. They take it. They accept that this is what's happening to them. And it happened to their friends." He paused, then added in a tone laced with sarcasm. "They can commiserate with

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each other. If every company's doing it, the norm has just changed forever."

It has. These days stress is a way of life for many white-collar workers, regardless of their particular employer, age, or position on the corporate ladder. Today's pumped-up, high-pressure corporations thrive on stress, which helps motivate people to meet inflated and sometimes unrealistic short-term goals, regardless of the long-term toll it takes on their employees. Within the white-collar "sweatshop," there is little effort to disguise stressing techniques: in fact, the practice has been elevated to the level of business "philosophy." As one management consultant expressed his version, "The workplace is never free of fear—and it shouldn't be. Indeed, fear can be a powerful management tool."¹⁸

Fear, insecurity, and exhaustion all contribute to rising stress levels in today's large corporations. And these pressures reinforce each other as overworked, stressed-out colleagues take their anxieties and resentments out on their fellow workers. "You should check out workplace bullying," Maureen, a thirty-year-old marketing representative at Simon and Schuster, advised me.

The problem, in Maureen's assessment, was not so much outright confrontation between professional colleagues: it was a "subtle" hostility between them that often manifested itself in rude behavior, angry or dismissive conversational tones, or short fuses. In her own office, she complained, people were quick to blame others for anything that ever went wrong. "The underlying thing is the sense of fear. They're feeling very insecure about their jobs," she commented.

A tour through the vast body of work-related websites on the Internet reveals "The Work Doctor," a site started up in 1998 by two self-described employee advocates and psychologists by training, who promise to "listen unconditionally . . . support the hurting." Calling itself the "U.S. Campaign Against Workplace Bullying Headquarters," the site attracts an average of nearly thirty-five thousand visitors per month, ranging in age from seventeen to fifty-eight—a strong indicator that others agree with Maureen's assessment of the significance of this problem. (The site's demographic

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surveys suggest that about 30 percent of its visitors are "professionals" and another 40 percent work in some type of management position. The majority of these have been female so far.)

According to the "Work Doctors," "the American workplace's 'dirty little habit' is that harassment, abuse, cheating, power plays, denial of simple rights, and other forms of mistreatment occur regularly. Rarely is the wrongdoing illegal. It is bullying." Among the classic workplace types they describe is the "opportunistic bully" who has "learned well the lessons of contemporary workplace dealings. He is only copying what he sees the parent [corporation] do," which includes "seizing the opportunity" to compete with and "obliterate" coworkers.¹⁹

"The backbiting and politicking that you see at big companies these days is unbelievable," noted Zoe, the veteran of Levi Strauss's downsizing campaigns. "People become territorial because they're so scared. They're vying for power. If you know that cutbacks are coming, you'll do anything to position yourself so that you'll survive, even if nobody else does. There's lots of nastiness. All kinds of false accusations."

Along with verbal abuse and bullying, physical violence can surface in today's stressed-out offices. The phrase "going postal" has entered the lexicon of today's high-pressure, lean-and-mean workplaces: shorthand for people who crack under the strain of working conditions too tough for them to handle. But although few of us even give a thought to the risk of office violence, some studies suggest that it may be more common than many people imagine.

According to a survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management, nearly 10 percent of employers can expect some type of violent altercation to break out in their offices each year.²⁰

Direct links clearly exist between corporate developments and the personal problems facing many workers. In Maureen's office, relationships between coworkers deteriorated during the period when Simon and Schuster's corporate parent, Viacom, began to publicize its intention to sell part or all of the publishing company as soon as an acceptable bid came along.

WHITE-COLLAR SWEATSHOP

"The Pace Was Insane"

I spoke to her during that period of complete instability (while she and her colleagues were, as she reported, plagued by anxieties about whether they could expect good severance packages if and when they got laid off, if and when the company got sold). "The fear level is pretty high," she concluded, then added that for a lot of people, including herself, these kinds of stress "also delay what seems like the passage to adulthood. Things like buying a house. Because people feel like even if they're employed, they don't know if they can hold on to their jobs long enough to live with a mortgage."

White-collar men and women also move in the opposite direction—fueling credit card binges and other forms of risky overex tension that thrived during the 1990s—as they seek to alleviate their anxieties about the future of their careers or their feelings of personal inadequacy (because they haven't managed to get their hands on stock options or some of the other corporate goodies they keep reading about in the newspapers).

To make matters worse, with cost control a major priority at most large corporations, workplace conditions have deteriorated in ways that may even seem, at first glance, to be too petty to notice. But they quickly add up for stressed-out workers whose tempers are frayed and whose patience is short. "Did you hear about the water employees whose company, NYNEX, had merged with Bell Atlantic in the course of the many months I spoke with each of them.

They were different types of people, and each one had his or her own perspective on what had gone wrong with the company during many years of employment. But all three were preoccupied with water—or, to be more specific, with the lack of drinkable water at the company's office on Manhattan's Avenue of the Americas.

"The quality of water in our building is rather poor," one told me, his voice positively dripping with understatement. He explained that NYNEX had made it a practice to provide employees at this facility with bottled water: scarcely the most decadent of per quisites (especially when one considers the time it took people to ride the elevator downstairs and walk to a nearby grocery or coffee

shop, inevitably crowded, instead). But after the merger, "in the interests of cost reduction," this manager said, drawing out every word, "they eliminated the bottled water."

He wanted to make certain I understood just how discomfiting this decision had proven to be. (In fact, all three NYNEX veterans spent considerable time describing the water situation.) "No water means no coffee either." From her vantage point at Simon and Schuster, Maureen would not have been surprised to learn that heated confrontations soon broke out between departments that decided to ante up for their own water so as to be able to make their own coffee in the office, and those coworkers from other departments who occasionally crept in during a busy morning or afternoon to sneak a spare cup to which they were not entitled.

Annoyances of all scales abound. For all the jokes Scott Adams pokes at cubicles in his Dilbert cartoons, life in a cubicle is far from funny for most of the estimated 35 million white-collar workers who reside in one during eight-, ten-, twelve-, or longer-hour workdays. For one thing, cubicles keep getting smaller. Facility Performance Group Inc., an Ann Arbor, Michigan-based organization that tracks office trends at seventy large corporations, has reported that work spaces have shrunk by 25 to 50 percent over the past ten years for most workers.²¹

Far from creating the collaborative, open environments that many top executives boast of when describing their "bulldpen" designs (often from their own, multiwindowed and lushly furnished offices), cubicles foster all kinds of negative feelings. As one workplace observer aptly described, cubicles (whether of the relatively larger or relatively smaller variety) remain "mechanisms of constant surveillance."²² Their ticky-tacky, one-size-fits-all, institutional-gray designs demean white-collar professionals just as surely as do the lack of a door and any illusion of privacy. Meanwhile, their very air of impermanence—since most can be set up, moved, or reconfigured at will—is a not-so-subtle daily reminder of the lack of stability and security in the corporate workplace. If there is any lesson that the 1980s and 1990s have taught white-collar workers, it is that they can be replaced easily.

Other new arrangements convey similar, unspoken messages. With the virtual office or "hoteling" trend, employees are stripped of anything resembling a workspace and become "floaters" who may claim a desk or an office only on an as-needed basis. Despite the impact on people's day-to-day work lives, the strategy has its appeal for companies looking for ways to cut real estate and operating costs.

Cubicles, "hoteling" offices, and other arrangements like these help ratchet up job pressures by creating corporate atmospheres that are anything but comfortable, secure, and permanent. Most people understand the subtext. For cubicle dwellers: Work harder, because we can all see, smell, and hear what you're doing . . . or not doing. For hotelers: Be productive, or your "stay" at this company will soon be over.²⁴

The Toll

Unpleasant working conditions, difficult job demands, and rising career insecurities have combined to make stress the constant companion of many of today's white-collar men and women. It is a complaint so common as to seem banal, boring, perhaps the most hackneyed cliché of our age. But the reality of it is the very opposite: a heart-pounding, anxiety-ridden emotional state that regularly plagues men and women at work and outside of work, leading to migraines, ulcers, pinched nerves, insomnia, clammy palms, skipped heartbeats, and any number of other symptoms of our stressed-out age.

One estimate pegged the annual cost to the U.S. economy of such work-related stress at \$200 billion.²⁵ Talk to enough corporate staffers these days and that seems quite believable. "I've started getting heart palpitations. I just went through stress tests. I'm trying now to detach myself, to focus on my own health," Donald told me. Just forty years old, he was a marketing staffer who had spent more than a decade at NYNEX, where he managed to hold on to his post through a number of layoffs and, eventually, the company's merger with Bell Atlantic. But between the years of cutbacks, the career uncertainty, the increasing workload, he was bitter. "I don't

have any pride in this company. I don't feel any attachment. I don't feel any loyalty. It's only money. That's all I care about—the money." His father had been a blue-collar worker, employed by a municipal agency. Donald recalled, "He hated his job. He was powerless. He pushed me to become a professional. But even though I'm a professional, it doesn't mean anything. We're all just trying to survive."²⁶

The long-term toll of job-related stress appears to include all kinds of health risks. One ten-year study, which tracked about one thousand Swedes and was conducted by UCLA and the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, found that serious work-related problems made a person "five times more likely to develop colorectal cancer." Meanwhile, "unemployment of more than six months doubled the cancer risk."²⁷

A University of California at Davis research team that tracked female lawyers found that those who worked long hours were "five times as likely to experience great stress at work and three times as likely to suffer miscarriages as [were] female lawyers who work fewer than 35 hours a week."²⁸ A University of Michigan study of nearly fifteen hundred nurses found that women who worked more than forty hours during the week or experienced high job stress were 70 to 80 percent more likely to deliver premature, underweight babies.²⁹

I discussed job stress with Ida, a sociologist by training, whose career path had taken her through a series of human resources jobs at large corporations. "What helps people who are living through life at a lot of these companies is that there's the mortgage to pay and all those bills. Their outlet is sports, the Internet," she told me, adding, "The fact is that for many people, they have no choice."

Ida started working in corporate America during the 1960s, when she believed that the nation's prosperity would help make people's work lives more challenging, secure, and rewarding. But she lost those illusions after participating in a huge round of cutbacks at a big-name manufacturing firm. "People were literally dying. There were heart attacks, all kinds of medical responses." Now, she

believes something very different: that job stress is responsible for "the decline of the civil society, the increase in traffic, in rage."

Damaging as they may be, however, recent increases in stress and work loads are only part of the problem for the inhabitants of today's white-collar "sweatshops." Despite nearly two decades of economic prosperity, many people have found themselves working harder within a business world whose reward structure has deteriorated in a variety of important ways.

TWO

"Working Three Times Harder and Earning Less": The Shrinking Paycheck and Other Squeezes

Not only are today's corporations demanding more work from their white-collar employees, they are also scaling back on financial rewards. Despite all the economic good tidings that rang in throughout most of the past decade, many men and women had salary increases that were modest at best. Most people employed by large corporations watched workplace benefits and bonuses diminish or disappear.

As the new millennium began, studies by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Economic Policy Institute demonstrated just how few middle-class Americans actually shared the fruits of recent prosperity. During the decade from 1988 through 1998, family incomes for the nation's middle 20 percent rose by \$780, compared with a gain of \$50,760 for the nation's wealthiest, those in the top 5 percent income tier.¹

Other white-collar men and women found themselves somewhere in between, with their salaries rising (although not as fast as their job and stress loads). If they felt better off, it usually had more to do with rising home prices and retirement-account values than with the size of their paychecks and other, more liquid household assets. For countless people, the only way to obtain what seemed a fair reward for all their hard work was to push household borrowing to dangerous and unparalleled heights. Along the way, personal-savings rates dropped to a historic low.² At a time when most working people were already stressed out by the voracious demands of