



Enough to make your head spin

With few new hires, people at work are feeling snowed under and stressed out

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By MICHAEL PRECKER / The Dallas Morning News

Fittingly, the woman talking about being overworked didn't have time to do the interview all at once.

So she called back several times amid a busy day of travel, meetings and paperwork to talk about the stress of working for a local technology company that she thinks ought to hire more people.

"It's OK to go through peaks and valleys of being incredibly busy and then having time to catch your breath," says the Dallas woman, who asked that her name and her company's name be withheld.

"But now it seems people are going through this busy, everything-is-incredibly-urgent time all the time. That takes a toll."

National statistics seem to back up the claim. Despite a rapidly growing economy, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported Friday that the nation gained only 1,000 new jobs in December, far fewer than analysts had predicted.

That means that people who have jobs are working harder. Productivity – the measure of a worker's output per hour – increased 9.4 percent in the third quarter of 2003, the biggest increase in 20 years, and has been up every quarter since the first quarter of 2001.

In many cases, it means they're doing the jobs of people who were laid off in tough times, but aren't being rehired as the company's bottom line improves.

"It's more hours, no lunch, more deadlines, more projects," the Dallas woman says. "It's just more everything."

Richard Smith, who designs antennas for wireless networks at Navini Networks in Richardson, saw much of his engineering department disappear last fall when the company lost customers and was forced into layoffs.

"But it's almost the same workload, so what do you do?" he says. "It's a little different mindset. You try to make smart decisions and move on, because you've got something else you've got to work on. And you just keep working until the job's done."

Mr. Smith, 37, says he understands the situation: "When you're a startup you have to lean up or you're going to run out of money and everybody's out of a job."

Joyce Gioia, president of The Herman Group, a management consultant firm specializing in workplace issues, says there are two reasons that the economic recovery isn't producing more new jobs.

"Employers want to make sure this is going to last," says Ms. Gioia, who is based in Greensboro, N.C. "They feel like one more Sept. 11 attack and things will fall apart again and they don't want to get caught with extra people on their staff."

More important, she says, is what she considers to be a shortsighted focus on profits.

"They feel like, 'Why do we need to hire anybody? Let's make a few more dollars instead,'" Ms. Gioia says. "The downside of that is we're burning out the employees."

The Dallas woman used the same term. "You get burned out," she says. "I've seen that in action here. It seems like companies have figured out they can do it with less people. So they have people wearing more hats and doing more things."

The result, she says, is longer workdays, more stress and less time with her husband and young son.

"We're eating more fast food and we're all a little grumpier," she says.

She feels fortunate that her husband can share the burdens.

"If the spouse can't pick up the slack, it becomes a real squeeze," she says. "He works closer to home, so he can pitch in. It's either that or you hire outside help, and then you're in the situation that you're not taking care of your own family."

Mr. Smith is single and says he can't imagine balancing family responsibilities with his commitment to his job.

"I couldn't have done this job and been married and stayed married," he says.

Keeping up at work, he says, has meant cutting back nearly everywhere else.

"I used to go to yoga every morning and sometimes after work to keep my stress level down, but now I don't have time," he says. "I used to be more spontaneous with my time, but now I can't. You just have to see that part of your life is gone for now."

Mark Gorkin, a Washington, D.C., psychologist and author who conducts workplace stress-reduction seminars, says those complaints are common nowadays.

"I do programs for private companies and government agencies, and that keeps coming up," says Mr. Gorkin, who calls himself the Stress Doc. "They're saying, 'We're underfunded, understaffed, doing more with less and becoming lean AND mean.' "

A survey of technology workers released in November by trade journal *Computerworld* found that 59 percent of the information technology professionals polled said their work-related stress has increased since a year ago.

Nearly as many people, 55 percent, said their overall job satisfaction was lower than a year ago.

Mr. Smith emphasizes that he's not complaining, because he enjoys his work – and because he's still working.

"I had buddies here who had to leave Texas for jobs, and I have others who are still looking for work," he says. "Six or seven years ago I had standing job offers. These days you know they can hire somebody else."

Mr. Gorkin says some companies have the attitude of "Hey, you're lucky to have a job." They shouldn't.

"Maybe they think they're saying, 'Well, look at the bright side,' but actually it shows absolutely no empathy," he says. "People are working harder and wondering why management doesn't feel they're more important. It can affect people's self-esteem as well as the sense of loyalty and commitment."

Mr. Gorkin recommends that employees get together and discuss the situation, for everyone's benefit.

For management, he says, "Instead of just saying 'tough it out,' you'd better give people an opportunity to acknowledge what's going on and to vent a little bit. When they feel they're all in this together, you can create an atmosphere where you can solve problems."

For employees, Mr. Gorkin says, discussing their workloads can help them stand up to unreasonable demands.

"It's not one person saying no and being seen as having a bad attitude," he says. "When the group says, 'We've got to make some adjustments and build in some wiggle room,' that makes a difference."

Mr. Gorkin suggests that managers can boost the morale of overworked employees with small gestures ranging from an afternoon off to a gym membership to an occasional catered lunch.

But that won't take the place of hiring enough people to do the job, he says.

"A Band-Aid won't help when you need stitches," Mr. Gorkin says.

Ms. Gioia of The Herman Group agrees, saying that companies will eventually regret overburdening their employees.

"Productivity may be up, but morale is way down," she says. "So many of those employees are ready to bolt when they see another job opportunity."

She is co-author of the book *Impending Crisis – Too Many Jobs, Too Few People*, which predicts a shortage of qualified workers by the end of the decade.

"Some companies are going to be out of business," Ms. Gioia says. "Their people will go where they can enjoy their work, in a place that more highly values them, instead of a culture of 'chew you up and spit you out.' "

Staff writer Victor Godinez contributed to this report.
