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Discontent at work becoming the norm

Scott Adams used to struggle for material for "Dilbert," his renowned, syndicated comic strip that chronicles a pointy-haired boss and his tormented staff, such as Tina the Tech Writer and Asok the Intern.

But in recent years, real-life tales of worker disgust and job frustration have poured into Adams' electronic mailbox and provide fresh fodder for the strip as jaw-dropping as any fictional cartoon.

There was the e-mail he received about a worker who was asked to contribute to his own farewell party. Another was from someone who relocated for a new position, only to discover that the post didn't exist. He was then offered a worse job.

"I think people were blaming themselves if there was anything wrong in their life" years ago, Adams said in a telephone interview last week. "Now people are more likely to blame their management."

In various surveys, workers are registering the highest levels of job dissatisfaction in years. Experts in the field, from labor professors to the founder of the largest classified-advertising Web site Monster.com, say workplace anxiety is near epidemic. "Working scared," one academic termed it, describing people who are improving their skills and working harder, but afraid to look for greener pastures.

With job creation plodding along and corporate America unsettled by mergers and technological change, workers say they feel more unease and face fewer options to move around.

Pay-raise growth is slow, health care costs are up and headlines about executive greed fuel frustration. Companies, meanwhile, uncertain of reports of the economy's comeback, have been hesitant to hire. The added work often falls on the shoulders of employees who remain.

The anger and annoyance has helped fuel lottery sales and become punch lines for TV commercials and new country music. A current hit by Alan Jackson and Jimmy Buffett, "It's 5 O'clock Somewhere," justifies a midday escape to happy hour — a modern-day descendant of Johnny Paycheck's "Take this Job and Shove It," the 1970s anthem to worker disgust.

"Most people at my job are stressed out. A lot of people are depressed. It's just really bad right now," said an engineer for a major fiber-optics company who consented to an interview, but didn't want to be identified because of concerns about being fired.

The Internet is a font of outlets for such discontent. One site, ihatemyjob.com, includes jokes about management and awkward work situations. Message boards for Microsoft's msn.com include more than a thousand entries on the topic, covering subjects from "mean bosses" to "office gossip."

"ARRRGH Why am I still here?" one poster wrote. "I keep hearing about how much I'm respected and valued, yet we just hired a guy over a year ago who is making more than me! I think it's time to get off the fence and do something else."

In a recent Conference Board survey of 5,000 U.S. households, less than half of respondents described themselves as satisfied with their jobs. That was the highest percentage of disgruntled workers since 1995 in the survey by the New York-based business research group.

More disgruntlement in the survey: Fifty-six percent said they are unhappy with their employer's bonus plan, and 46 percent were dissatisfied with their company's promotion policy. On the plus side: Fifty-six percent said they like their co-workers, and 58 percent are OK with their daily commute.

In a Web opinion survey by Monster.com, 57 percent responded that they feel overworked, and 83 percent of them are not satisfied with their jobs. About 80 percent of the Monster respondents said they are unhappy with their work/life balance, with 71 percent saying they work more than 40 hours a week.

Bill Cunnane, founder of Boyce Cunnane Inc., a Baltimore firm that recruits tax professionals, said several of his potential clients feared changing jobs, uncertain of what may await them behind the proverbial door No. 2.

"You can hear it in their voice," he said. "They want to make a move, but don't know whether this is the right time."

Another Baltimore recruiter, Sabine Tucker, said she knows of about 20 open positions, from entry-level to executive vice president. But even in cases where a big pay package is being dangled, nobody's biting. People are reluctant to risk taking a new job not as secure as their current one, she said.

That is a major change from a few years ago, she noted. During the late 1990s technology boom that inflated the stock market, many workers jumped from job to job, pouncing on opportunities that seemed more enriching or lucrative. But Tucker can sympathize with the change of heart.

"If you can find some way to deal with the situation you're in, I advise them to stay there (at their present job), because you never know what you're getting into," said Tucker, of Professional Corporate Search.

Charles Craver, a labor law professor at George Washington University Law School, said today's American worker appears as dissatisfied as any time he can remember.

A sense of job permanence and solid pay has eroded with the shift from manufacturing to a service economy, dominated by low-paying jobs at stores and fast-food chains.

Anxiety has been compounded by anger over the division of riches: Top executives average more than 500 times what average workers earn per year, far greater than the 40-times multiple between top and bottom pay three decades ago.

"I think what you've seen in the last 15 to 20 years is just an avarice that we haven't seen since the late 1800s," Craver said. "It's almost as if the robber barons have come back into vogue."

Workers are learning to manage their current situations — good or bad, said John A. Challenger, chief executive officer of the Chicago international outplacement firm, Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc. That could mean going back to school to build skills or becoming an in-house expert in their field.

"People are having to come to terms with the fact that they have to find a way to be happy with what they've got now a little bit more," Challenger said. "Come to grips with that, come to terms with that, rather than feeling that the grass is going to be greener if they move or keep moving up."

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Seven out of 10 workers believe that it's a bad time to find a good job, according to a survey by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Carl Van Horn, the center's director, concurs that workers appear less happy with their jobs than in years past, although he believes most are satisfied.

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If the economy picks up in the fourth quarter, disgruntled workers will begin bolting for new jobs, some predict.

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Futurist Roger Herman, who runs a consulting firm in Greensboro, N.C., has even coined a phrase for the phenomenon: "warm chair attrition."

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People are ready to leave, with their heart and mind set on changing employment, but they're still coming to the same job, warming their chair, he said.

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Herman believes the workplace shake-up that the next seven to 10 years will bring will make the job frenzy of the late 1990s "look like a practice session."

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Indeed, nearly two-thirds of employees questioned in a recent survey by the Society for Human Resource Management said they considered themselves very likely to launch or intensify a job hunt as soon as the market improves.

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"People are thinking, definitely thinking of moving on," said Jennifer Schramm, manager of workplace trends at the Alexandria, Va., trade group, which represents human resources professionals. "It's just that they're waiting until the time is right."