

Job burnout a growing issue with workers

By Ellen Jean Hirst, Chicago Tribune

While the economy is flashing signs of a rebound, it's a markedly different story for a growing number of workers, according to a recent survey.

More workers than ever report feeling burned out by their jobs, according to a ComPsych Corp. survey of nearly 2,000 employees conducted during September that sought to measure stress levels and their effects in the workplace.

"We're seeing a growing trend of employee burnout," said Richard Chaifetz, chief executive of Chicago-based ComPsych, a global provider of employee assistance programs. "It's a product of the sputtering economy – companies continue to be slow to hire, and prolonged employee stress inevitably turns into decreased performance, unfortunately."

During the recession, companies shed millions of jobs as they strove to cut costs and shore up the bottom line. But that work didn't go away with the elimination of the position, it just got shifted, pushing workers to do more with less, workplace experts said.

According to the report:

- Nearly 1 out of 4 employees say their top work priority is just being present at work
- About 2 in 3 workers report high levels of stress with extreme fatigue and a feeling of being out of control.
- More than half of those surveyed said they miss one to two days of work per year because of stress.

Sherrie Bourg Carter, a clinical psychologist who focuses on employee burnout, said she hears complaints from burned-out clients firsthand. Those who say showing up for a job is their highest priority are at high risk, she said.

“Each employee has increasingly demanding workloads,” said Bourg Carter, of Fort Lauderdale, Fla. “The work still has to be done, but employers want to do it with fewer employees. One person is often doing the work of two people and probably without any support staff.”

Herbert Freudenberger was the first to alert the world to the dangers of “burnout” in 1974 when he coined the term in his book, “Burnout: The High Cost of High Achievement.” He described burnout as a complete lack of motivation or reaction to incentives.

Since then, the term has become a catchphrase for maniacally stressful days. But burnout is a chronic problem, said Bourg Carter, author of “High Octane Women: How Superachievers Can Avoid Burnout.” It starts with mild stresses that most people experience, but if nothing is done to manage the stress, it can become unbearable.

“The actual state of burnout is not just a bad day or a bad week,” Bourg Carter said. “It’s when a person is so consumed with symptoms that they can’t function.”

Burnout usually sneaks up on people, she said.

“All of a sudden you’re exhausted, you’re feeling cynical and unattached,” Bourg Carter said, “and you think ‘What happened to me?’”

In addition to extra work, a lack of job satisfaction can exacerbate feelings of burnout, said Jennifer Schramm of the Society for Human Resource Management. Because middle-age workers have delayed retirement, Schramm said, younger employees feel like they can’t advance. Less than 50 percent

of workers said they were satisfied with their career development in the society's most recent job satisfaction survey.

"It could have a domino effect down the ladder where everyone feels a little bit stuck," said Schramm, the society's manager of workplace trends and forecasting. "A lot of the millennials really are having a hard time."

Those most likely to burn out are those who work excessively without breaks or outlets for stress, said Thomas Donohoe, who researches work-life balance at East Tennessee State University.

But there's hope, even for voluntary – and involuntary – workaholics.

Donohoe said talking about stressors with trusted friends or family is a good place to start. Other options include taking five minutes to eat or do simple exercises at the office, going for a brief walk or taking a catnap on the subway with a phone alarm set.

"Most people expect their brain to constantly be on," Bourg Carter noted, "but if your brain is constantly on, it will eventually shut itself off."