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## The Psychology of Productivity

### Workers are people, not machines!

A couple of topics appear frequently on the news – new employment prospects and stress-related suicides. It could be argued that the former ought to help decrease the latter. After all, more available jobs means a higher percentage of the population employed; and that, in turn, would surely result in less people struggling to make ends meet. In theory, this might seem to be true; unfortunately, employers are focused on boosting profits; and taking on what they consider to be barely enough staff to handle an increased work-load not only adds pressure to all of their workers; but in the long term also affects the company's profitability.

Maybe that doesn't sound right, but think about it. In the early twentieth century, daily working hours were considerably longer than today. Over time they were gradually reduced: not because it was the charitable thing to do – employers were forced by changes in the law and public pressure. This resulted in less exploitation and, one would hope, a happier workplace. No doubt individual wages were adjusted to compensate; but in order to maintain levels of production, employers had to take on extra staff to fill the gaps.

Of course, those who had always managed to cope with the longer hours would be disadvantaged by their lighter pay packets; and this put a strain on the budget because, while they were earning less, inflation saw to it that prices continued to rise. There was, however, a way out of the cash-flow problem: a magic solution called overtime. Employers might have balked at first, having to pay someone time and a half, or double time, just to have them do their normal job for maybe eight hours, then a further two or more to produce pretty much the same at a higher cost. The upside was that there was no need to train new staff. So, it did cost more, but the experienced workers knew what they were doing and, with a little 'friendly' persuasion, could be encouraged to increase their productivity by moving a bit faster and adopting a better work ethic.

All fine so far. The trouble with this strategy is physiological and psychological. Irrespective of the type of work, the body and mind can only take so much before they start to react. Even if the job is a no-brainer, manual workers still tire over a period. They tend to slow down, make mistakes and generally aren't as efficient at the end of a shift as they were at the start. Office workers are just as prone to fatigue, particularly with respect to concentration and decision-making. Their errors might not cause physical injuries; but they generally take extra time to put right which affects the smooth-running of the business, possibly customer relations. In both of these cases, at the end of the day employers are paying more for less.

Unfortunately, the answer to the employer/employee conundrum is never going to be simple. Many businesses operating for long periods each day, sometimes 24/7, might

contemplate changing their employees' shifts from 2 twelve-hour to 3 eight-hour. Adopting this system would mean having 3 workers to do a job which previously only required 2. Each worker would then be less likely to tire; their overall stress-levels should decrease; and, provided they don't slack off, their productivity should improve. Although this would see extra workers with jobs that they wouldn't otherwise have had; to retain profitability, the wages paid to the original two would have to be divided between three. Even if this satisfied the employer, I can't imagine their employees accepting that kind of pay cut.

It's all about money. Until something can be done to curb inflation, people are always going to need more to survive; and this can never happen as long as workers continually push for pay increases to keep up with rising prices. And, of course, for every extra dollar they are granted, the cost of whatever they are employed to produce goes up proportionately. It's a vicious circle.

The only solution I can see is with business owners being prepared to reduce profit margins; and individual workers seeing the sense in tightening their belts. Employees satisfied with a little less money could reduce their working hours giving them more time to relax and be with family. I realise some are struggling, but there are many more who are living well beyond their means. Spending less on extravagant luxuries would see them in a better financial situation; then they wouldn't need to earn as much. As long as their employers came to the party, the goods they produce could be sold cheaper; and if governments curbed their tax-gouging, everybody would win.

Wouldn't that be nice - a fair day's work for adequate pay; and more free time to play? Sounds like a good idea to me.

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