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How to Ease Your Workload

By RUTH MANTELL

Given all of the work that has been piled on employees at leanly staffed companies during the weak economy, it's understandable that some workers want to scale back.

Almost four in 10 workers say one of the most important attributes they will look for in a new employer is a less-stressful work environment, besides competitive pay and benefits, according to a survey of more than 5,000 workers and 2,000 employers conducted in February and March by jobs website CareerBuilder.com.



Andy Rash

But with unemployment still high, employees may be wary about talking to their boss about working less.

"The recession resulted in smaller staffs, heavier workloads and longer hours. While companies have become accustomed to doing more with less, workers may be feeling stretched too thin," says Jennifer Grasz, a spokeswoman for CareerBuilder.com. "As the economy improves, workers are growing more confident in their job prospects and are seeking out opportunities with more manageable workloads and better work-life balance."

'Burned Out'

To some extent, employers know there's an issue. In December, CareerBuilder.com asked more than 2,000 employers if productivity levels could last this year, and 16% said: "No, workers are already burned out."

Meanwhile, most employees have been willing to be somewhat flexible because they are trying to accommodate their employers' hopefully temporary financial problems, says Ford Myers, a career coach based in Haverford, Pa.

With unemployment still high, some are afraid of losing their jobs. "There's this dynamic of fear that someone will take my job if I don't do it," says Andrea Kay, a Cincinnati-based career consultant. "They know it's not good that they are burned out, but they just don't know what else to do."

Others put in a lot of hours regardless of what's happening in the broader economy. But at some point too much work can lead to problems.

"People burn out," says Mr. Myers. "They get resentful, and they start underperforming because of this

exhaustion and resentment."

And while more cash and better benefits are nice, additional compensation isn't a panacea. "Getting a bonus or a raise is fine, but that loses its luster very quickly if you're exhausted and resentful and miserable," he adds.

Offer Solutions

Workers don't necessarily have to switch companies to find greener employment pastures, however. Careful planning and honest communication can help win a reasonable workload even during times of high unemployment, experts say.

Ideally, workers should talk with their bosses before problems erupt. And calmness is key, experts say.

"Do it at a time when you are not highly emotional," Ms. Kay says. "Don't go into the boss's office and scream or yell."

Do go in with suggestions for how you can scale back yet still get your work accomplished, she says.

You want to offer solutions to your dilemma that will benefit your employer as well as you. You don't want to come across as creating a bigger burden.

If your employer's finances have rebounded somewhat, use that fact to strengthen your argument. Read the company's press releases and financial statements and talk to co-workers, Mr. Myers says.

When discussing ways to reduce your workload, be upfront and make it clear that you don't want to perform the job of more than one worker on a long-term basis, says Joel Garfinkle, an Oakland, Calif.-based executive coach.

Mr. Garfinkle suggests saying something such as: "I respect the challenges that the company is going through, but I also want you to know the impact that this is going to have on me." Explain it in a way that doesn't undermine your credibility.

And be prepared for a negative outcome. "It could turn out great or it could turn out poorly," Mr. Myers says. "They might say you are obviously not a team player."

Get Compensated

Your company may not be able to lighten your workload. If that's the case, you should ask to be properly compensated, says Jason Levin, district manager for career website Vault.com.

Present all of your recent accomplishments and detail all of the extra work you've taken on.

"Be very clear that you are willing to take on extra responsibility, but that if there is a merit increase or a performance bonus you want to be considered for those" in return, Mr. Levin says. "That has to be clear from the very beginning. You are in charge of communicating your own expectations."

But tact is important, he says. Workers should show that they understand the tough economic situation facing the company.

"Put yourself in the shoes of your boss, who is probably also under a lot of pressure and stress," Mr. Levin says. "Reiterate your commitment to the organization's success."

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