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# Under Pressure

Implications of Work-Life Balance and Job Stress

Human Solutions™ Report | 2006-07



Fall 2006

Dear Valued Customer:

Welcome to the first Human Solutions™ Report: *Under Pressure. Implications of Work-Life Balance and Job Stress*. The report was written by Graham Lowe, PhD, a thought leader in the arena of workplace health and productivity. **This is the first of a series of empirical reports** that we will publish for you on an annual basis, each on a relevant and timely topic or theme.

The *Human Solutions™ Report* stems from our pledge to bring you relevant and practical recommendations concerning your most significant human capital-related issues. And it reflects our attempt to counter the wealth of unsubstantiated and potentially misleading information about workforce issues circulating in the general media and other sources.

In this *Human Solutions™ Report*, we analyze two comprehensive Canadian workforce surveys using key questions pertaining to work-life balance and job stress. We recognize that quality of work-life is a pressing business issue for you and a necessary ingredient for a successful business strategy. **Yet to craft effective solutions to work-life issues, it is paramount that you have solid evidence on the scope and nature of the problems that are faced.** This is what the *Report* endeavours to provide.

As a customer whose opinions are important to us, we welcome your feedback. As well, we look forward to hearing about topics and issues you would like to see expertly addressed with empirical data in future reports.

As always, if you have questions feel free to contact us.

Regards,

**Craig Thompson, M.Ed., MBA**

VP Customer Relations

**Email:** [cthompson@humansolutions.ca](mailto:cthompson@humansolutions.ca)

**Phone:** 1.888.689.8604

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*Employees' quality of work-life is becoming a business issue. Leading employers are recognizing that positive work-life outcomes for employees are key ingredients of a successful business strategy.*

# 1 Introduction

Just ten years ago, Canadians were caught up in a pessimistic debate about the future of work. Grim scenarios predicted rising joblessness and economic insecurity. Commentators predicted the 'end of work' resulting from organizational downsizing, industrial restructuring, and new technology. Employees were treated as dispensable costs. Job quality was not on the agenda.

Now, however, the tables have turned 180 degrees. Employees' quality of work-life is becoming a business issue. For a growing number of employers, human resource challenges are their biggest concern. Leading employers are recognizing that positive work-life outcomes for employees—from achieving work-life balance to the satisfactions of challenging work and career development—are key ingredients of a successful business strategy.

In practice, improving the quality of work life remains a tough sell. Intuitively, many managers see the important links between the quality of work life and organizational performance. Yet they face barriers to progress. So it is necessary to update the case for taking action to improve the quality of jobs and work environments.

This report presents findings from two nationally representative surveys which documented the views of 600 employers and over 2000 workers on key quality of work-life trends in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The survey findings have action implications for managers, HR and OD practitioners, health and wellness professionals, employees and policy makers.

While work-life imbalance and job stress are not new problems, they have received more attention this decade than ever before. Together, these two problems pose risks to workers' well-being as well as to organizational performance. In crafting effective solutions, decision-makers need solid evidence on the scope and nature of the problems they face. Equally helpful is a clear understanding of what employers and employees view as potential solutions.

As the next section shows, a combination of powerful trends are pressuring employees at work—resulting in stress and imbalance in their lives—and also pressuring employers to rethink their human resource programs and practices.

To help employers and employees respond effectively to these pressures, this report uses survey evidence to answer a series of key questions and examine the practical implications for employers.

For those employers wanting to be proactive in designing employee assistance programs, the findings of this report underscore the need for a holistic approach—quality of work-life issues can't effectively be addressed piece-meal. Equally crucial, the findings highlight the need to move up-stream to address the root causes of stress and imbalance.

To craft effective solutions to work-life imbalance and job stress, decision-makers need solid evidence on the scope and nature of the problems they face.

### KEY QUESTIONS

This report uses survey evidence to answer the following questions.

- **Are work-life balance and job stress major business challenges?**
- **Has work-life balance become harder or easier to achieve?**
- **How are work-life balance difficulties and job stress related?**
- **What management actions can help improve work-life balance?**
- **What is the extent and level of job stress?**
- **What are the major stressors that employers can do something about?**
- **How does job stress affect the quality of life and job performance?**
- **What management actions can help reduce job stress?**

### ABOUT THE STUDY

This study was undertaken by Ekos Research Associates & Graham Lowe Group Inc. The study, called Rethinking Work, conducted two national surveys.

The **Worker Survey** used a random sample of 2002 individuals who were either employed, self-employed or unemployed (but who held a job at some point in the past 12 months), and is considered to be representative of the Canadian workforce. A sample of this size has a margin of error of up to +/-2.2 , 19 times out of 20. Telephone interviews were conducted during September and October of 2004, and the response rate was 27 per cent.

The **Employer Survey** includes 603 completed interviews drawn from a random sample, stratified by worksite size. The sample size has a margin of error of +/-04.0 per cent, 19 times out of 20. Telephone interviews were conducted in May 2005 and the response rate was 22 per cent.

## 2 21<sup>st</sup> Century Work

A convergence of powerful trends in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is pressuring employers to re-think their people practices. Indeed, the timing seems right to make the quality of work-life a strategic focus for business, as well as a public policy priority. These challenges (workforce aging, increasingly competitive labour market, information technology and rising benefit costs) create new possibilities for employers to achieve organizational performance goals while simultaneously meeting workers' personal aspirations.

At the same time, numerous employees are experiencing a reduced quality of work-life. This is reflected most prominently in work-life imbalance and job stress. With more women employed than ever before and dual-earner families common, work-life balance is an ongoing quest. Furthermore, there are many signs that job performance expectations have been ratcheted up since the 1990s. Thus, with both employers and employees under pressure to find ways to improve the quality of work life — and through this, enabling employees to contribute their best efforts — surely there is common ground for action.

People want meaningful work that enhances their overall well-being. Yet for some groups of workers, achieving well-being through work is not easy. While the average length of the workweek has been stable for decades, more Canadians are working longer hours (40 hours or more weekly).

Managers and professionals, in particular, have experienced increasing work hours while less-skilled workers have had a decline<sup>1</sup>. The paradox is that managers and professionals in knowledge-intensive industries — whom American analyst Richard Florida calls the 'Creative Class' — may work the longest hours and experience high stress levels, but they are among the best paid and have the most job autonomy of any workers<sup>2</sup>. Attempts to recruit and retain knowledge workers will increasingly depend on finding the right quality of work-life equation.

Many people assume that job stress related to work hours, demands, pace and other pressures is on the rise. While

*Work intensification involves more than longer work hours, highlighting how performance pressures and work effort affect workers. Thus, a 37.5-hour week may place different demands and expectations on workers today, compared to 10 or 15 years ago.*

this view may be overstated by the media, research evidence does support the claim that various sources of work pressure increased in the 1990s and the early 2000s. This intensification of work has been linked to rising performance expectations and workloads. Information technology is, for some, the hidden hand of work intensification. Studies in Canada, the United States, and Britain provide evidence that work intensification involves more than longer work hours, highlighting how performance pressures and work effort affect workers<sup>3</sup>. So even a 37.5-hour week may place different demands and expectations on workers today, compared to 10 or 15 years ago.

Stress and work-life conflict are intertwined, and the latter has been documented as both a cause and an outcome of job stress. Stress is one of the more commonly documented outcomes of demanding work. Job stress is increasingly recognized as a determinant of employee health and productivity. The experience of chronic stressors (or strain) is used in theoretical models as a predictor of increased risk of mental and physical health problems, including chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, asthma, migraines, and ulcers<sup>4</sup>.

This snapshot of major work trends forms the backdrop to the survey findings presented in this report. This new evidence helps to illuminate the business implications of work-life imbalance and work stress — or stated positively, the benefits of a healthy work-life balance and a job that is personally fulfilling and engaging.

## **21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY WORK CHALLENGES**

**Workforce aging.** One-third of the workforce is between the ages of 45 and 64, and the choices these older workers make will redefine retirement. With fewer younger workers, many employers are facing a talent crunch.

**Labour market.** Workforce demographics have combined with a strong economy to create the most competitive labour market in a generation, adding to labour and skill shortages.

**Technology.** Workers and employers alike are coming to terms with the new possibilities information technology is opening up for how, where and when we work.

**Benefit costs.** Rising pension and health benefit costs are putting pressure on employers to find creative solutions — without jeopardizing employee recruitment, retention and engagement goals.

# 3 Employers' Challenges

## QUESTION

*Are work-life balance and job stress major business challenges?*

## FINDINGS

Turning to the survey findings, we begin with how employers view quality of work-life issues as human resource challenges. The Employer Survey asked respondents (usually senior managers) if their organization had experienced 15 human resource challenges in the 12 months prior to the survey. As **Figure 1** shows, 29 percent of the 600 employers surveyed in the spring of 2005 had experienced none of these difficulties. The most common difficulties were workload/work-life balance and employee stress, experienced by 36 percent and 33 percent respectively. Interestingly, recruitment and retention came third. All other difficulties were experienced by around 20 percent or less of employers.

Respondents were also asked if they had taken action to address any of these challenges. Less than one-third reported any actions to address workload/work-life balance, stress, or any of the other issues listed in **Figure 1**. Among the most common actions—cited by 32 percent—are focused on safety issues, an area that very few employers experienced difficulties.

The most common HR challenges experienced by employers are workload/work-life balance and employee stress. Yet fewer than 1/3 of employers surveyed took any action to address these issues.

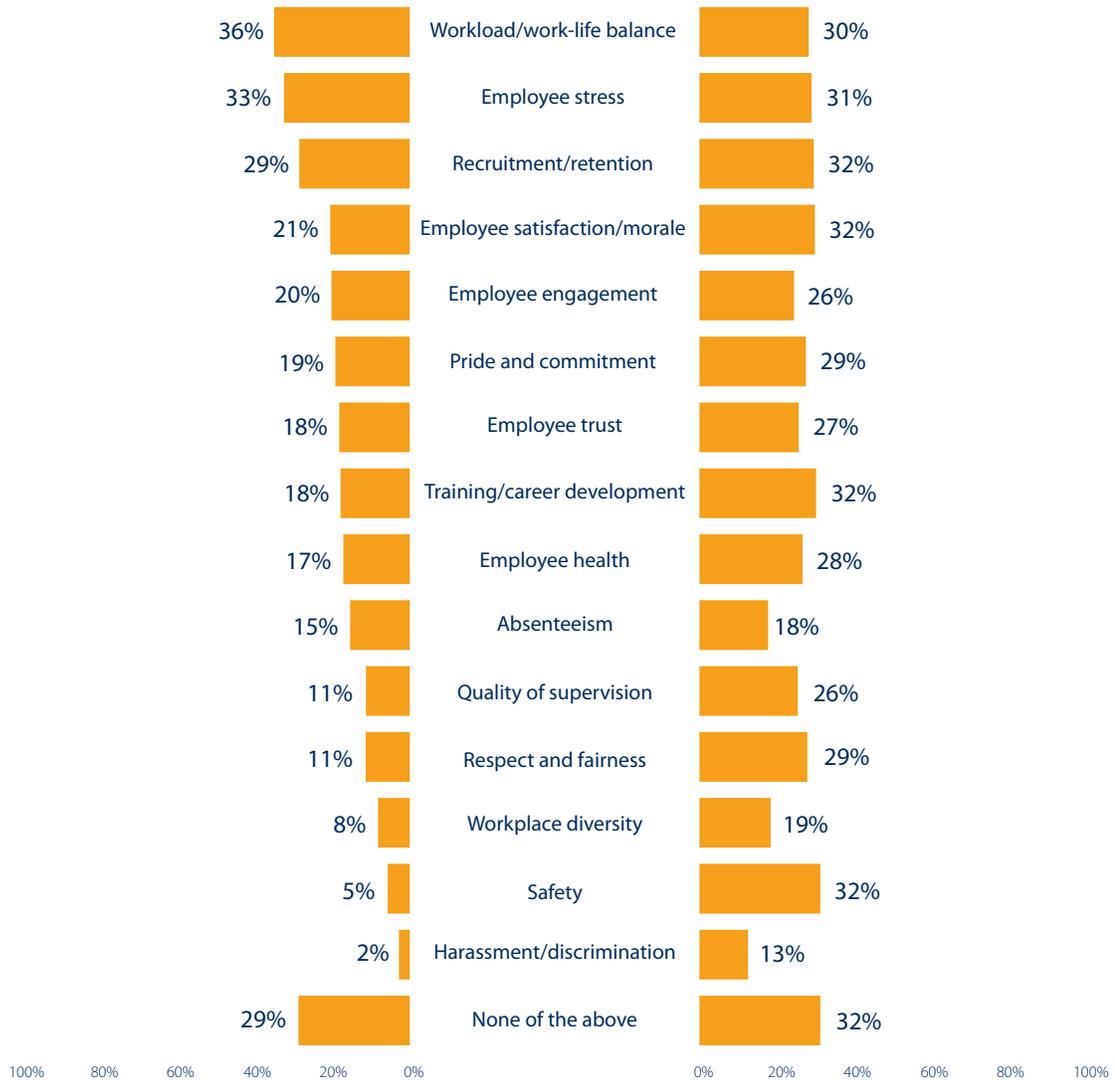
## IMPLICATIONS

- Despite quality of work life difficulties being the most pervasive human resource challenges employers face, a minority of employers are doing anything to find solutions. Still, close to one in three is taking action in this area.
- This poses a potential risk to human resources. How serious a risk will be examined below, by documenting work-life balance, work pressures and job stress from the perspective of workers—building a case for employer action.

**FIGURE 1. EMPLOYER RESPONSES TO MAJOR WORKFORCE CHALLENGES**

**“In the past 12 months, has your location/ organization experienced an increase in difficulties in any of the following areas?”**

**“In which of these areas, if any, has your location/organization taken action to address difficulties?”**



n=603

Source: *Rethinking Work*, EKOS Research Associates & Graham Lowe Group national employer survey, spring 2005. © 2006 The Graham Lowe Group Inc.

# 4 Work-Life Balance

There is an enormous research literature on work–life issues. Typically, researchers have focused on work–family conflict rather than the broader, positively framed concept of work–life balance. Work–family conflict research investigates how people meet the expectations of multiple roles and establish boundaries between roles in life<sup>5</sup>. A good example is the 2001 *National Work–Life Conflict Study* in Canada. Researchers Linda Duxbury and Chris Higgins found that 58 percent of their sample reported high role overload—having too much to do in a set time<sup>6</sup>.

## 4.1 Changes in Work-Life Balance

### QUESTION

*Has work–life balance become harder or easier to achieve?*

### FINDINGS

This is not an easy question to answer, because the kind of research needed to provide definitive evidence is rare. Duxbury and Higgins' report, *Work–life Balance in the New Millennium*, has been widely cited as proof that work–life conflict and work stress increased during the 1990s<sup>7</sup>. The study compares survey data from 1991 and 2001, using samples of large organizations that volunteered to participate (rather than random samples of the national workforce). Duxbury and Higgins conclude that role overload increased substantially due to rising work demands, although other forms of work–family conflict had smaller increases.

The best available trend data on work–life imbalance are from Statistics Canada's *General Social Survey* (GSS) in 1991, 1995 and 2001. The GSS show that the proportion of workers feeling somewhat or very dissatisfied with work–life balance rose from 16.7 percent to 20 percent over this period<sup>8</sup>. The 2001 GSS also asked workers who reported feeling dissatisfied with work–life balance the main reason why they

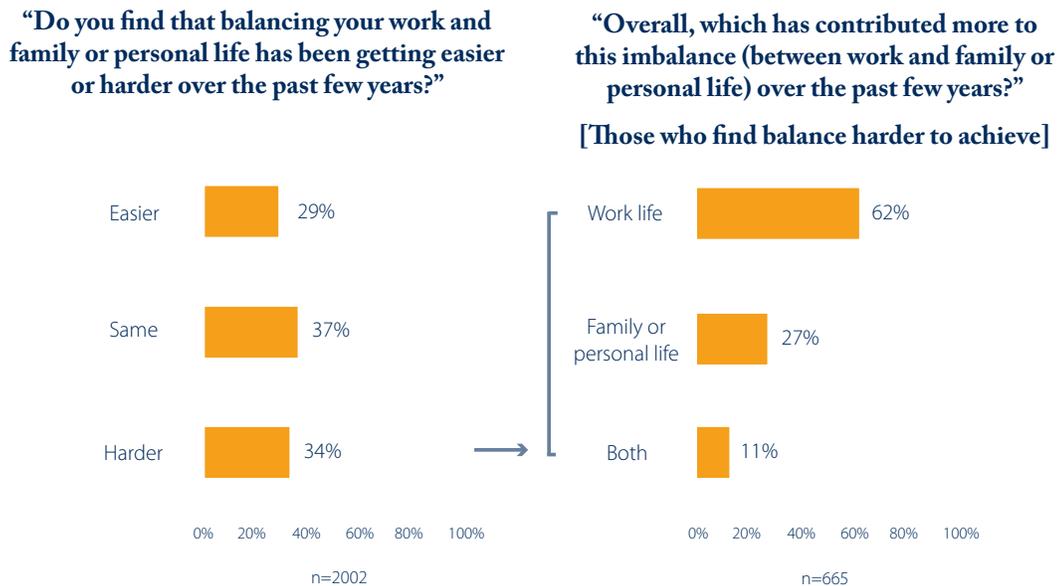
*Of all age groups, workers aged 35 to 44 are most likely to report that work–life balance is difficult to achieve. In other respects, workers who have experienced more difficulty in this regard fit the profile of the knowledge workers, more likely to be managers or professionals, university graduates, and high income earners.*

felt this way. The most frequent reasons given were time related: not enough time for family/spouse/partner/children (46 percent cited this reason), and too much time spent on the job (cited by 42 percent).

Rounding out this picture of work–life balance trends, our worker survey finds considerable variation in workers' personal experience of work–life balance, offering a more muted interpretation of changes in work–life balance or conflict in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (**Figure 2**). One in three (34 percent) of the 2002 workers surveyed in late 2004 reported that it had become harder for them to achieve work–life balance over the past few years, while 29 percent had found it easier to achieve. The largest group of workers surveyed (37 percent) experienced no change.

For those who found it harder to balance work–life, 62 percent attributed this to work–related factors. Far fewer attributed the increased imbalance to family or personal factors (27 percent) or a combination of these and work factors (11 percent). Workers who do not get paid for overtime, managers, those who belong to professional associations, and workers with high annual incomes are significantly more inclined than others to cite their work as the most significant contributor to their work–life imbalance.

Of all age groups, workers aged 35 to 44 were most likely to report that work–life balance had become more difficult to achieve. In other respects, workers who have experienced more difficulty in this regard fit the profile of the knowledge workers, more likely to be managers or professionals, university graduates, and high income earners. Workers who are not compensated for overtime are most likely to say that the work–life balance has become harder to achieve over the past few years. Increased work–life imbalance also is more pronounced among workers in large organizations, compared to medium-sized and small organizations. In contrast, the groups most likely to be finding it easier to balance work and personal life are older workers, the self-employed, those who work less than 25 hours weekly, and those working no overtime. Interestingly, compared to other regions, workers

**FIGURE 2. RECENT CHANGES IN WORK-LIFE BALANCE**

Source: *Rethinking Work*, EKOS Research Associates & Graham Lowe Group national worker survey, fall 2004. © 2006 The Graham Lowe Group Inc.

in Quebec are most likely to report no change in work-life balance in recent years — raising interesting questions about the role of the provincial government’s child care support program.

We also examined the magnitude of work-life conflict. The survey asked workers to rate 22 specific job and workplace characteristics in terms of how important each characteristic is to them — or in other words, how highly valued each is. Later in the survey, respondents were asked to rate their current job on the same characteristics, in order to determine to what extent they were meeting their expectations. By comparing the difference between these two sets of measures, we can calculate an ‘expectations gap.’

There is a gap of 29 percentage points between the importance Canadian workers place on work-life balance, and the extent to which they actually achieve good balance in their current job. That is, while 63 percent of survey respondents placed high importance on being able to achieve work-life balance, only 34 percent had achieved ‘good’ balance in their job. The gaps on four other characteristics were slightly larger: pay, trust in management, job training, and a healthy and safe workplace.

## IMPLICATIONS

- Overall, there is a small increase in difficulties balancing work and family or personal life early this decade. The problem may not be at crisis level, but it is clear that this is a dynamic trend, with people experiencing more or less balance depending on their family, personal and work circumstances.
- With three in 10 workers experiencing a significant discrepancy between their work-life balance needs and actual experiences in this regard, employers need to identify who these people are and endeavour to close this gap.
- Employers and policy-makers need to think in life-course terms, recognizing that an individual’s needs change as they move through different phases of life.
- A flexible or ‘menu’ approach to work-life policies and programs — including Employee and Family Assistance — would allow workers to choose what best suits their immediate needs, compared with a ‘one size fits all’ approach.
- Understanding the fit between employees’ expectations and needs, on one hand, and their actual workplace experiences, on the other hand, is a key piece of information for effective human resource planning.

## 4.2 Balance and Stress

### QUESTION

*How are work-life balance difficulties and job stress related?*

### FINDINGS

While work-family conflict can be thought of as a result of work stressors, it also has been studied as a stressor since the 1970s. Theoretical models examine how the work-family interface affects individual health and well-being, and in turn how this affects a person’s performance in work and family roles<sup>9</sup>. The similarity to job stress research is illustrated by the emphasis in both areas on how role demands, and control over these demands, affect workers’ health and productivity.

**Figure 3** examines the relationship between work-life balance and job stress. The pattern is clear: workers who have experienced difficulties balancing work and personal life also are likely to report chronic job stress, compared with those experiencing no change or a reduction in work-life balance difficulties. Indeed, the 55 percent of survey respondents who found it harder to balance work-life reported often or always being under stress in their job, compared with 26 percent

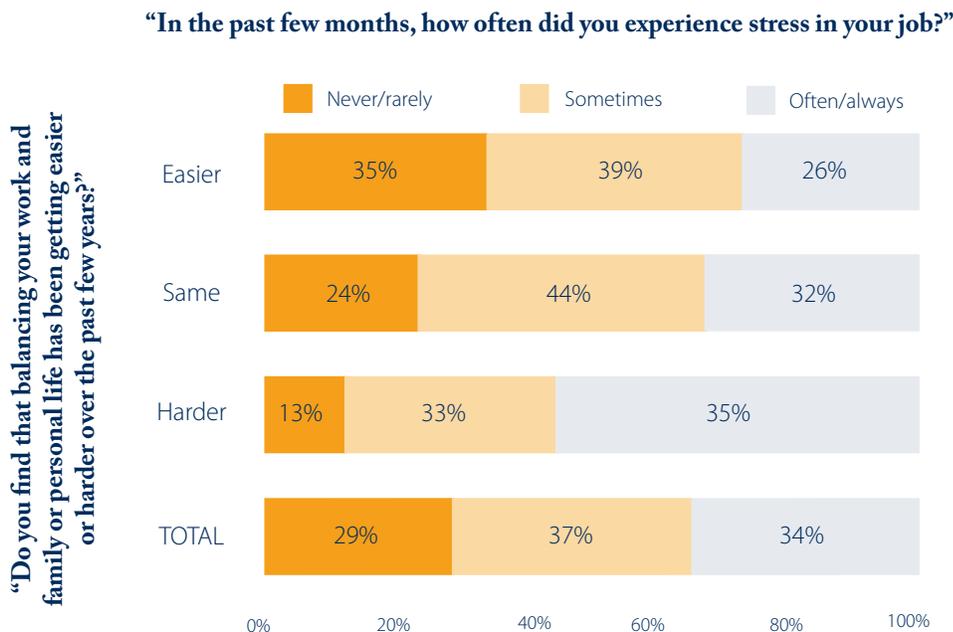
of those who found work-life balance easier to achieve. Demographic factors alone do not help explain work-life balance.

Probing this more deeply, multivariate statistical analysis (simultaneously testing the influence of relevant job, organizational and demographic characteristics) confirms that the level of job stress has an independent effect on work-life balance. High stress is equated with work-life balance difficulties. Workload also appears to have an independent effect on work-life balance, to the extent that workers who agree that “work is assigned fairly and equitably in my organization” are more likely to report work-life balance not changing or getting easier. Work hours per se did not influence work-life balance.

### IMPLICATIONS

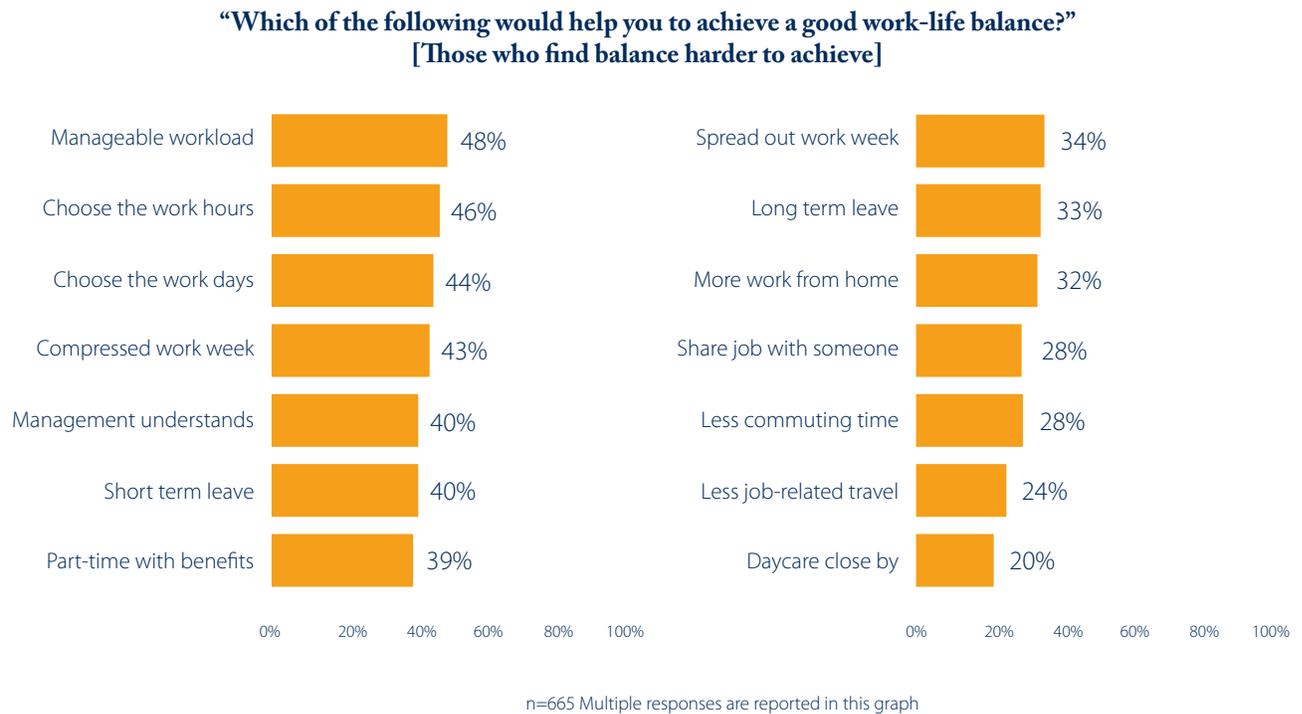
- Stressful job conditions and work-life imbalance are pieces of a more complex puzzle.
- While not definitive, this study suggests that employer actions to address workload distribution could provide employees who experience work-life conflict with a better balance.

**FIGURE 3. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND JOB STRESS**



n=1979 Differences statistically significant, p < .001

Source: *Rethinking Work*, EKOS Research Associates & Graham Lowe Group national worker survey, fall 2004. © 2006 The Graham Lowe Group Inc.

**FIGURE 4. ACHIEVING GREATER BALANCE**

Source: *Rethinking Work*, EKOS Research Associates & Graham Lowe Group national worker survey, fall 2004. © 2006 The Graham Lowe Group Inc.

## 4.3 Solutions

### QUESTION

*What management actions can help improve work-life balance?*

### FINDINGS

The worker survey asked respondents for their views on various options to reduce work-life conflict (**Figure 4**). Among those individuals finding it harder to balance work and family, the single most important change that would help them achieve a better balance is a manageable workload (cited by 48 percent), followed by flexible work hours (46 percent) and being able to choose the days they work (44 percent). Again, these are consistent themes in work-life balance research.

Preferred solutions vary by specific workforce groups. For example, women (compared with men) are more inclined to prefer choosing their own work hours and days, and working a compressed workweek. The most highly educated workers, as well as those who are not compensated for overtime hours they work, give higher priority to a manageable workload. Choosing one's work hours is considered particularly

helpful by those 35 to 44 years of age, compared to other age groups. Workers reporting the lowest annual incomes, and people who do not work overtime, are more likely than others surveyed to think that being able to choose the days when they work would help them balance their personal and professional life. Individuals in households where both people work full-time are more inclined to say that a compressed workweek would be beneficial. Younger workers (under age 35) view having an understanding manager as especially helpful in achieving work-life balance.

However, employers and policy-makers will need to be creative when crafting work-life balance solutions. The worker survey found little support, even among those who said it was harder to balance work and life, to make trade-offs to achieve job flexibility now (**Figure 5**). Just over 1 in 4 were 'very willing' to make up hours over the course of the year in return for greater flexibility now, 17 percent were 'very willing' to make up the time in future years, 15 percent were 'very willing' if it meant limiting their career advancement, and 1 in 10 were willing to forego an equivalent portion of their wages. Survey respondents who have found it harder to balance their work and personal lives are even less willing to make up the hours or take a cut in pay to gain flexibility. In fact, in the case of a pay cut, it is the respondents who are finding it easier to balance their lives who show greater willingness to reduce their income in order to gain flexibility.

According to the worker survey, most employees see their supervisors as moderately to very effective. However, the lowest ratings are for work-life balance. Specifically, close to 9 in 10 respondents rated their supervisors as moderately or very effective on creating a work environment free of harassment or discrimination and encouraging teamwork. Over 80 percent rated their supervisors as effective in terms of encouraging innovation, sharing information, following through on commitments, and listening to and acting on suggestions. More than three-quarters also rated their supervisors as effective at providing feedback on job performance and helping them achieve work-life balance. However, 22 percent of employees considered their supervisor to be ineffective in helping them to achieve work-life balance—the most negative of any of the evaluations in **Figure 6**.

Employees with higher ratings of supervisor support for career development, encouragement of innovation, and listening to and acting on ideas, are considerably more likely than employees with lower ratings for supervisors on these issues to report high levels of job satisfaction. In other words, these areas are more strongly associated with job satisfaction than other areas of supervisor effectiveness measured. Women rate their supervisors more highly than men on most aspects, including the provision of feedback,

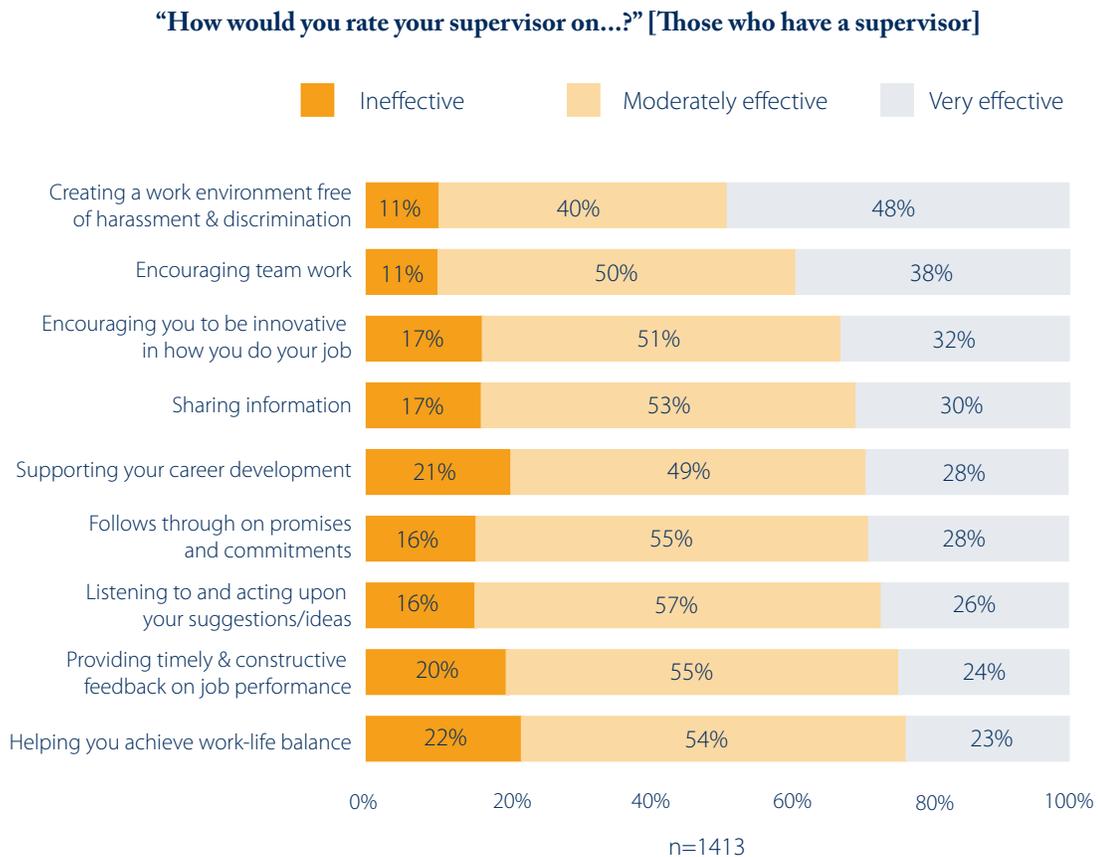
support for career development, helping to achieve work-life balance, encouraging team work, listening to suggestions and ideas, and encouraging innovation. Employees in the smallest workplaces (with 10 employees or less) are more likely than those working in larger organizations to rate their supervisors as very effective at helping them achieve work-life balance, encouraging teamwork, and creating a workplace free of harassment and discrimination.

In summary, reducing work-life conflict depends on fostering a workplace culture that values and supports balance. Getting the right mix of policies and programs that meet the needs of the workforce is part of this, with Employee and Family Assistance Programs playing a pivotal role. But to be fully effective, these programs also must address the closely related problem of job stress.

**FIGURE 5. TRADE-OFFS TO ACHIEVE WORK-LIFE BALANCE**



Source: *Rethinking Work*, EKOS Research Associates & Graham Lowe Group national worker survey, fall 2004. © 2006 The Graham Lowe Group Inc.

**FIGURE 6. EMPLOYEES' EVALUATION OF THEIR SUPERVISOR**

Source: *Rethinking Work*, EKOS Research Associates & Graham Lowe Group national worker survey, fall 2004. © 2006 The Graham Lowe Group Inc.

## IMPLICATIONS

- Evidence reinforces the need for employers to address workload and work schedules as root causes of work–life imbalance.
- A holistic approach to designing interventions is needed, acknowledging that work and family are not separate spheres.
- Corroborating previous research, supervisors play a critical role in work–life balance. To echo Duxbury and Higgins’ recommendation, most important in this regard is the development of ‘supportive managers’ — who are good communicators, focus on output rather than hours, show respect for employees, and support their career development.
- Flexible options that reduce total take home pay are not likely to find wide support. Given the trade-offs that employees are unwilling to make in order to achieve work–life balance, it is important for employers to consult with employees to better understand their priorities and preferences, and how these vary by demographic groups.
- The tangible benefits of providing an environment that supports work–life balance need to be more effectively and widely communicated.
- Few studies document the prevalence of employer family-friendly policies or practices. Partly filling this gap, the employer survey found that about one in three employers recognize workload and work–life balance as a problem and are taking action.
- Next steps must include helping other employers diagnose the extent of these problems and designing interventions that are evaluated for their effectiveness.

*Work-life balance and stress go hand in hand. What seems to matter in this regard is the importance workers place on balance in their lives and the effectiveness of workplace policies and practices in supporting them to achieve this goal.*

# 5 Job Stress

A prominent theme in workplace research is that workers' perceptions of the quality of their work environment are critical for outcomes such as job satisfaction, commitment, absenteeism and performance<sup>13</sup>. An extensive body of research on work-life conflict documents how the relationship between work and non-work affects an individual's health, as well as their performance in work and family roles<sup>14</sup>. These studies corroborate one of the key findings from job stress research: work-role demands, and control over these demands, affect workers' health and well-being.

## 5.1 Job Stress and Life Stress

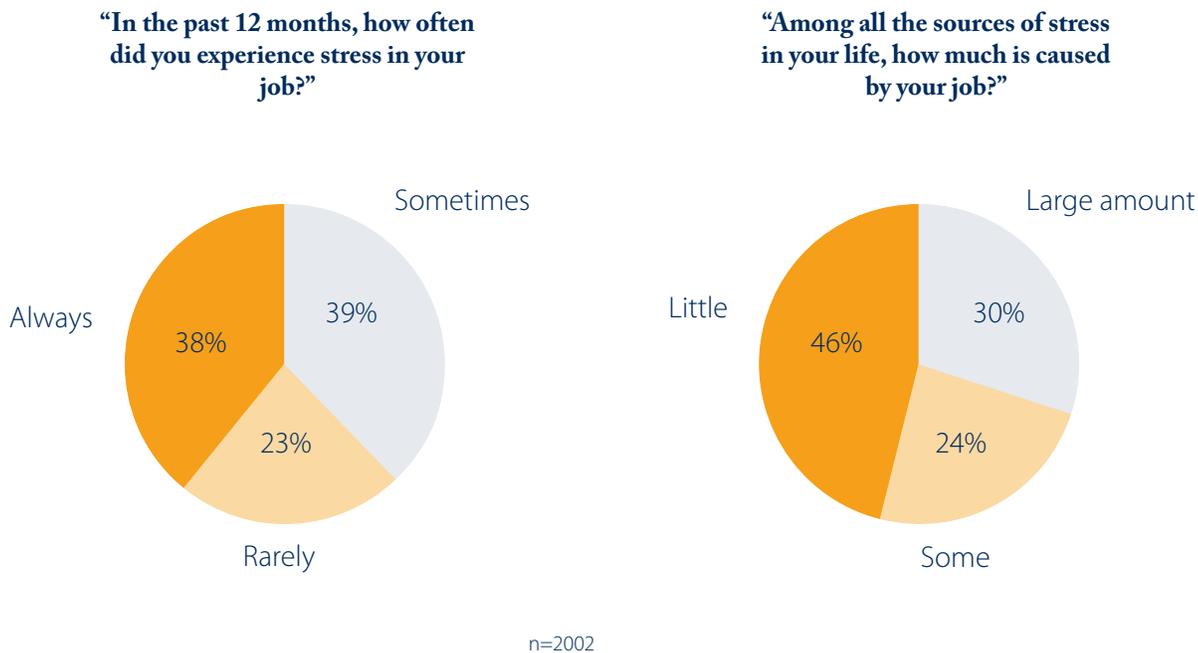
### QUESTION

*What is the extent and level of job stress?*

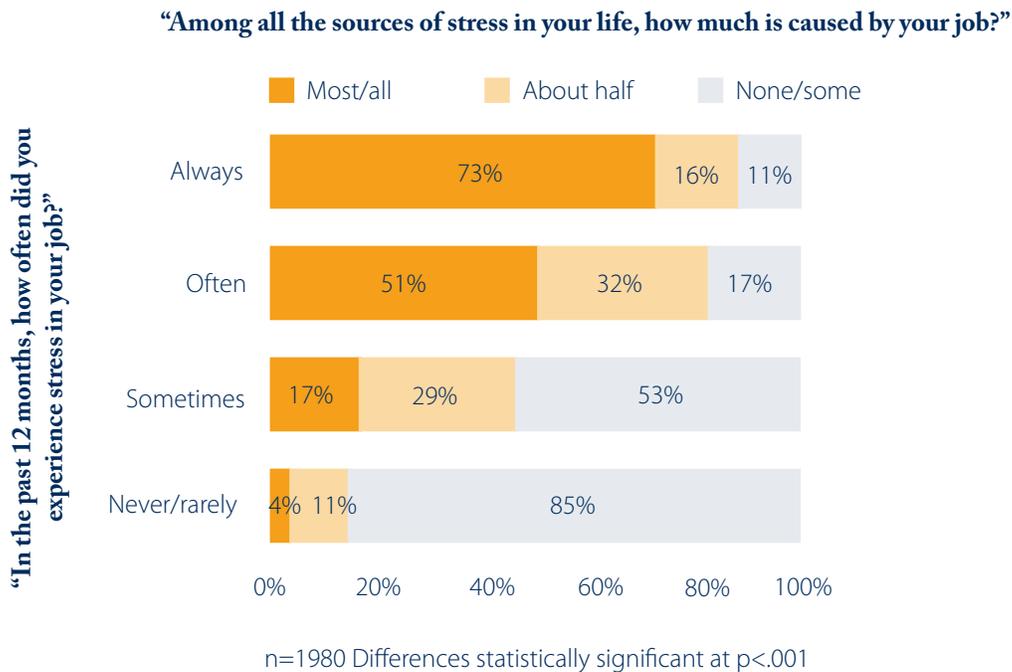
### FINDINGS

Turning now to job stress findings from the worker survey, **Figure 7** reveals that a stress-free work environment is a rare thing in Canadian workplaces, according to respondents surveyed. Indeed, the large majority (77 per cent) of

**FIGURE 7. SELF-REPORTED JOB STRESS**



Source: *Rethinking Work*, EKOS Research Associates & Graham Lowe Group national worker survey, fall 2004. © 2006 The Graham Lowe Group Inc.

**FIGURE 8. JOB STRESS AS A SOURCE OF OVERALL STRESS IN LIFE**

Source: *Rethinking Work*, EKOS Research Associates & Graham Lowe Group national worker survey, fall 2004. © 2006 The Graham Lowe Group Inc.

Canadian workers reported that they had experienced stress in their job either “always” or “sometimes” over the past 12 months. Only about one in five (23 per cent) said they “rarely” experienced stress in their job.

Those more likely to have “always” experienced stress on the job over the past 12 months include: workers reporting a higher (compared with lower) level of education and income; full-time workers; workers in permanent (compared with temporary) positions; individuals in households where both people work full-time (compared with other households); those in professional occupations (compared with non-professionals); people who work in health, education and social services (compared with other industries); workers in the largest organizations; and those who work unpaid overtime.

Furthermore, many workers find that their job is a significant source of the overall stress they experience in life. While the largest group of workers (46 per cent) say that their job causes only a “little” of the stress they experience in their life, 24 per cent say that it causes “some” stress and an additional 30 per cent say it is the source for a “large amount” of the stress they experience.

Convincing evidence of the impact of working conditions on overall life stress is presented in **Figure 8**. In particular, note that 73 percent of survey respondents who always experienced job stress reported that their job causes most or all of the stress in their life. This contrasts with 4 percent of those who rarely or never experience job stress.

## IMPLICATIONS

- The prevalence of frequent job stress, and the fact that this source of stress is a major contributor to overall life stress, makes this a leading 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace and quality of life issue. Employers can’t afford to ignore it.

**30%** of employees report that their job is the source of a “large amount” of the stress they experience.

## 5.2 Key Stressors

### QUESTION

*What are the major stressors that employers can do something about?*

### FINDINGS

This study was not intended to test theories of the cause of job stress (or ‘stressors’), but rather to offer new insights that can lead to positive changes in workplaces. In this regard, multivariate statistical analysis was used to examine the independent effects of key potential stressors on self-perceived stress.

Standard demographic, organizational and job characteristics were used as predictors. Demographic factors alone do not explain variations in job stress. What is interesting is that long work hours (paid and unpaid combined) is the strongest independent (i.e., statistically controlling for the effects of other factors) predictor of frequent job stress. The relationship between total work hours and stress, portrayed in **Figure 9**, is what raised our curiosity about the effect of work hours, so the multivariate analysis was designed to see if long work hours predicted higher levels of stress when other relevant factors were taken into account.

While the study did not include a direct workload measure, it did ask workers if “work is assigned fairly and equitably” in their organization. Workers who agreed with this statement had significantly lower levels of job stress than those who disagreed, taking other factors into account. Furthermore, workers who agreed that they have a good balance between their work and personal or family life experience less stress than workers who lack this balance, regardless of other factors. The importance a worker places on achieving a good work-life balance also appears to influence the experience of job stress: the more personal importance placed on balance, the higher the perceived level of job stress, taking other factors into account.

Workers who report they have a good balance between work and personal/family life experience less stress than workers who lack this balance.

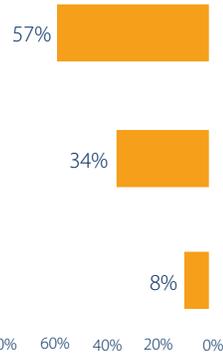
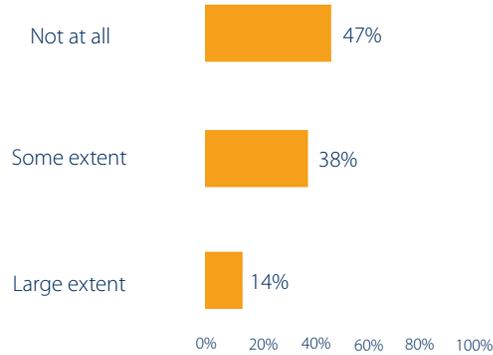
**FIGURE 9. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WEEKLY WORK HOURS AND JOB STRESS**



Source: *Rethinking Work*, EKOS Research Associates & Graham Lowe Group national worker survey, fall 2004. © 2006 The Graham Lowe Group Inc.

**FIGURE 10. HEALTH PROBLEMS RELATED TO JOB STRESS**

“In the past 12 months, to what extent has your level of job stress caused...for you?”  
[Those who reported being stressed at work at least sometimes]

**Mental Health Problems****Physical Health Problems**

n=1535

Source: *Rethinking Work*, EKOS Research Associates & Graham Lowe Group national worker survey, fall 2004. © 2006 The Graham Lowe Group Inc.

**IMPLICATIONS**

- This in-depth analysis helps to identify the factors that managers must address to reduce stress. Consistent with much previous research, work demands—measured here by hours worked and the distribution of work—is a potential source of stress that employers (and employees) can act upon.
- The high incidence of job stress among knowledge workers raises concerns about the sustainability and costs of the job and career pressures these workers face. Employers need to assess the business and personal risks of job stress, focusing specifically on knowledge workers who put in excessive hours.
- Work-life balance and stress go hand in hand. What seems to matter in this regard is the importance workers place on balance in their lives and the effectiveness of workplace policies and practices in supporting them to achieve this goal.

**5.3 Impacts on Well-Being and Productivity****QUESTION**

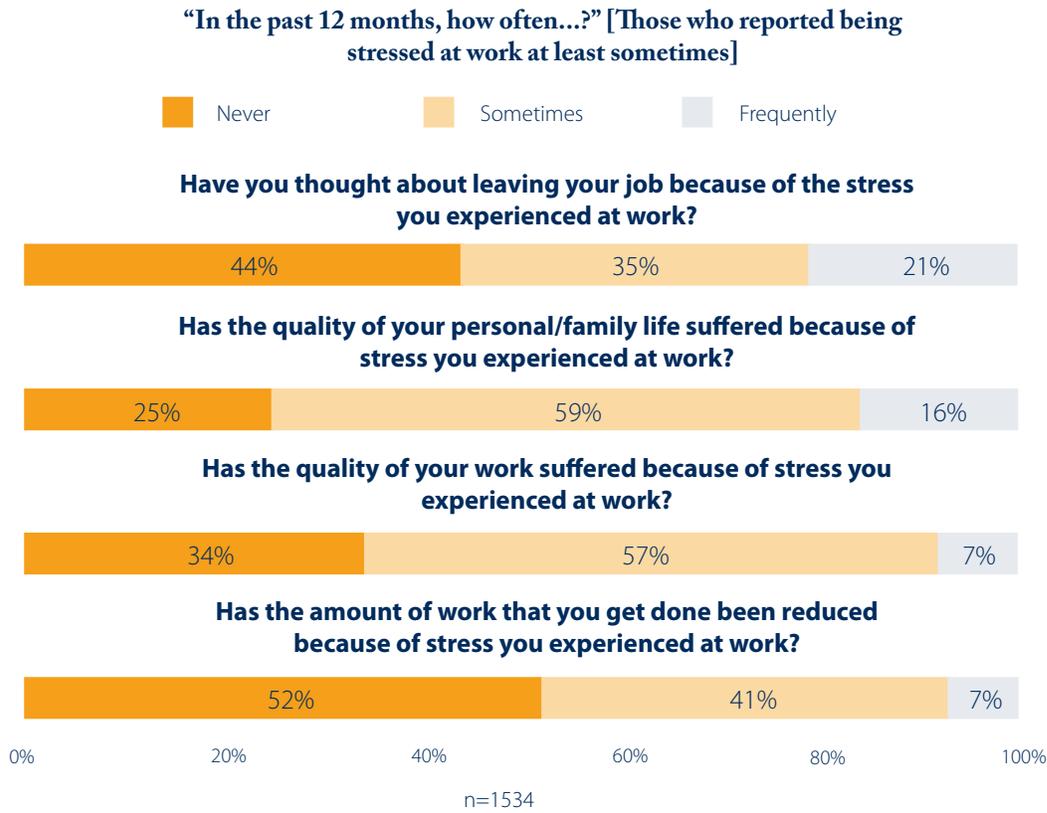
*How does job stress affect the quality of life and job performance?*

**FINDINGS**

Not only have many workers experienced stress on the job over the past year, but large numbers also reported that their health was affected over this period as a result of stress in the workplace (**Figure 10**). Indeed, job stress has serious consequences, with more than 52 per cent of those who reported experiencing job stress “sometimes” or “always” in the past 12 months saying that this has caused them physical health problems and 42 per cent reporting suffering from mental health problems as a result of the stress. The perceived effects of job stress on health seem to be greater for women than for men. For example: 47 per cent of women say that stress has affected their mental health at least to some extent compared to 37 per cent of men; and 57 per cent of women say that their physical health has been affected by stress at least to some extent compared to 49 per cent of men.

There are broader health impacts, too. More than one in five respondents in the worker survey had consulted a health professional for physical or mental health problems caused by job stress at some point in the past.

**FIGURE 11. CONSEQUENCES OF JOB STRESS**



Source: *Rethinking Work*, EKOS Research Associates & Graham Lowe Group national worker survey, fall 2004. © 2006 The Graham Lowe Group Inc.

Job stress can also have direct consequences for employers in terms of employee absenteeism. Only about one in three workers surveyed said that they had not missed a single day’s work in the past 12 months because of illness or injury. Just under half (44 per cent) said that they missed between one to five days, however, 20 per cent of workers indicated that they had been absent more than six days in the past year. Looking at the 12 months prior to the survey, respondents reporting job stress ‘often’ or ‘always’ were significantly more likely to be absent from work than co-workers with less frequent job stress.

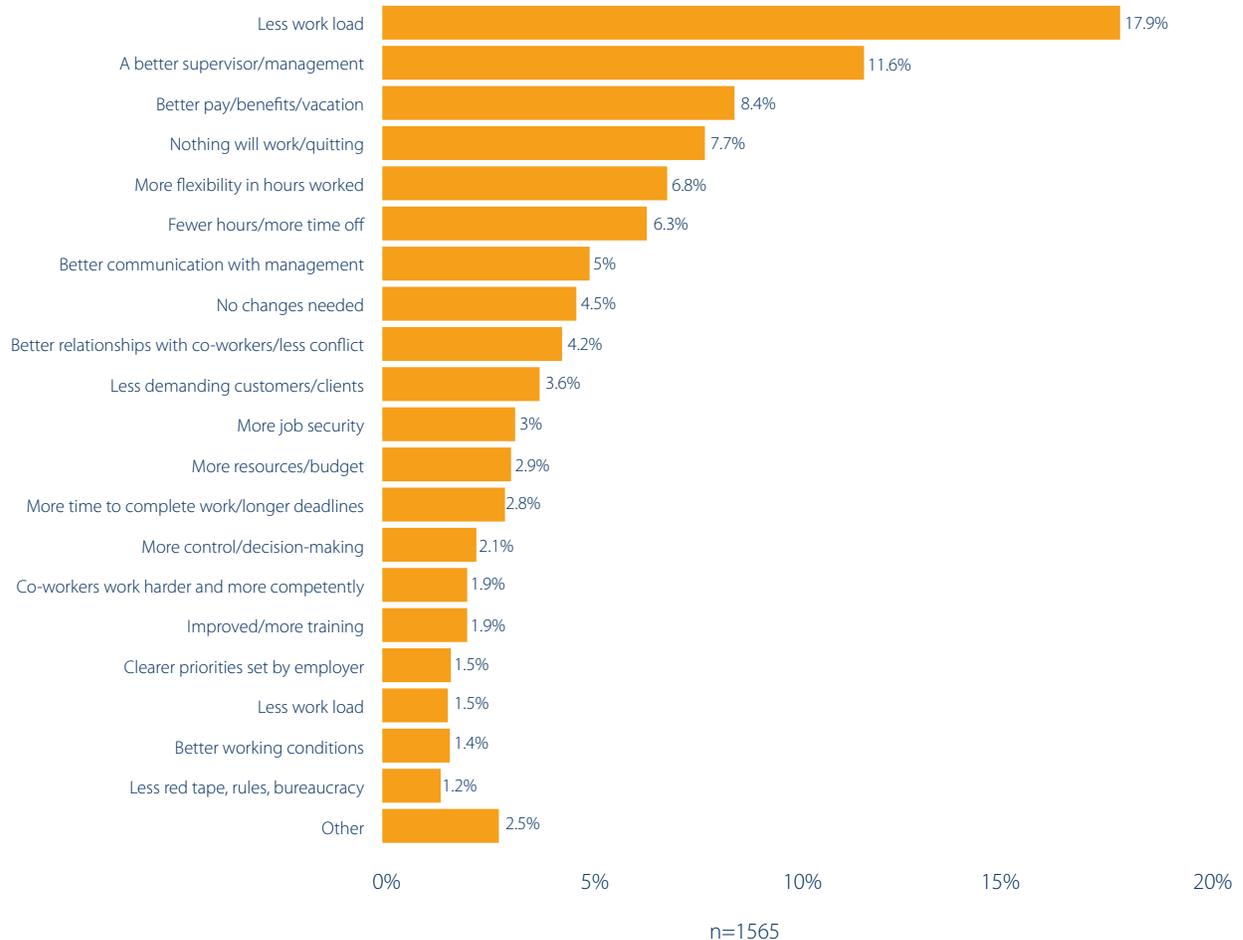
As shown in **Figure 11**, the impacts of job-related stress can be found in other areas as well. For example, about one in five workers who have experienced job stress “sometimes” or “always” over the past 12 months said that they “frequently” think about leaving their job because of this stress. An additional one in three said that this thought “sometimes” crosses their mind. A sizable portion of those reporting job stress (16 per cent), also said that the quality of their personal or family life “frequently” suffered over the past year because of work stress, and 59 per cent said that it “sometimes” suffered. In terms of their job performance, 65 per cent of this group indicated that job stress “sometimes”

or “frequently” reduces the quality of their work, while about half (48 per cent) said that the amount of work they accomplish has been reduced because of stress they experience at work.

Employees who reported job stress ‘often’ or ‘always’ were significantly more likely to be absent from work than co-workers with less frequent job stress.

**FIGURE 12. ACTIONS TO REDUCE JOB STRESS**

**“If you could make one change that would reduce the level of stress in your job, what would that be?” [Asked only of respondents who experienced job stress often or always]**



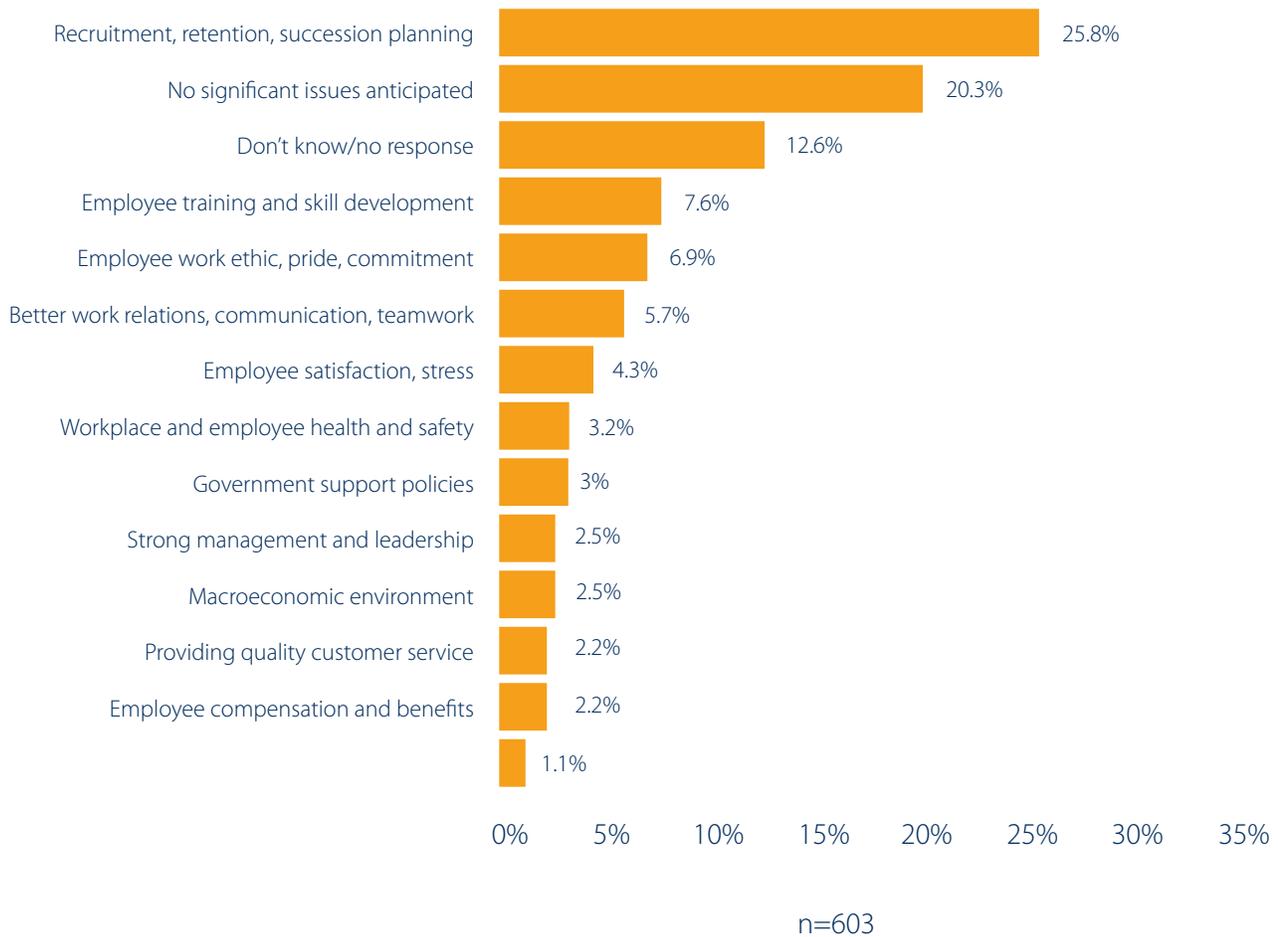
Source: *Rethinking Work*, EKOS Research Associates & Graham Lowe Group national worker survey, fall 2004. © 2006 The Graham Lowe Group Inc.

**IMPLICATIONS**

- Self-reported job stress imposes real costs for workers and employers, ranging from reduced quality of life and health problems, to reduced quality and quantity of work.
- The link between job stress and health has implications for Canada’s over-burdened health care system. High levels of self-reported job stress are related to higher health system utilization, imposing public costs as well as any resulting lost productivity for employers. Not only do these costs need to be quantified, but there needs to be a public discussion about the role and responsibilities of employers for addressing the root causes of the problem.
- This study raises questions, which require more research, about how the underlying causes of work stress are associated with rising absenteeism, rising employer health benefit costs, individual job performance, overall quality of work life, and the overall burden imposed on the health care system.

**FIGURE 13. EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN RESOURCE CHALLENGES IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS**

**“In the next five years, which human resource management or workplace issue will have the greatest impact on the success of your organization?”**



Source: *Rethinking Work*, EKOS Research Associates & Graham Lowe Group national employer survey, spring 2005. © 2006 The Graham Lowe Group Inc.

## 5.4 Solutions

### QUESTION

*What management actions can help reduce job stress?*

### FINDINGS

When given the opportunity to make suggestions about changes that could reduce the level of stress in their job, survey respondents provided a long list of potential changes (Figure 12). At the top of this list was a reduced workload,

suggested by 18 per cent of those who experienced job stress often or always. The second most common suggestion had to do with improved supervision or management, suggested by 12 percent. Better pay/benefits/vacation time was the third most frequent answer, mentioned by 8 per cent, followed closely by responses from workers who had given up hope of improvements and were ready to quit (about 8 percent). Fewer working hours and greater flexibility in hours worked were each cited by 6 percent of workers experiencing job stress.

Probing the suggestion to reduce workloads as a way to reduce job stress, specific groups of workers were more likely to mention this action: workers between the ages of 45 and

54, workers reporting a higher level of education and income, those in full-time and permanent positions, individuals in households where both people work full-time, professionals, technicians, individuals working in social services (health, education and social assistance), those in the largest organizations and people who work unpaid overtime.

What is the likelihood of employers acting on these suggestions? We already established that about one in three employers are addressing job stress, although the study does not document the actions being taken. However, the employer survey did ask respondents to indicate the human resource management or workplace issues they expected to have the greatest impact on the success of their organization in the next five years. The answers to this question are presented in **Figure 13**.

Perhaps not surprisingly, recruitment and retention is at the top of the list of future challenges. Interestingly, one in five employers surveyed do not anticipate any significant human resource or workplace issues — suggesting perhaps that everything is under control or that they have not planned for the future. Another 13 percent did not know or did not respond to the question. Only 4 percent expected quality of work life issues, such as stress or employee satisfaction, to affect organizational success.

## IMPLICATIONS

- Reducing workloads and improving the quality of supervision are priority management actions that have good potential to address the causes of job stress.
- Interventions designed to support employee quality of work-life goals — including Employee and Family Assistance Programs — need to be expanded accordingly.
- Employers will be better able to meet their future recruitment, retention and succession planning needs by including quality of work life goals in comprehensive workforce strategies.

Job stress has serious consequences — including physical and mental health problems. As a consequence, **more than 1 in 5** respondents had consulted a health professional for these issues.

Despite this, **only 4%** of employers expect quality of work-life issues (including stress) to affect organizational success.

*The ideal future workplace is within reach— it is a workplace that supports workers to achieve personal wellness and career goals and taps their full potential for the benefit of the organization and its customers, clients and shareholders.*

## 6 The Future Workplace

The broad contours of the future Canadian workplace can be sketched out using the above findings. While the 1990s was marked by pessimism about the future of work, there are signs in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century that give cause for optimism. Creating the ideal future workplace requires, above all, positive and proactive responses to the work pressures workers experience, and the host of human resource pressures employers face. These are one and the same: what workers experience as work pressure—mostly as work-life imbalance or job stress—are the early warning signals of future human resource problems for employers. That's why a long-term, proactive approach to people issues is so essential.

Recognition of a problem is a pre-requisite for taking action. So the fact that approximately one in three employers reported work-life balance and workload to be the area where they are seeing increasing difficulties in the recent past—and are doing something about it—is grounds for optimism. We need to know more about what exactly they are doing, and how effective it is, but at least for this group of employers the 'business case' for action no longer needs to be made.

From the perspective of workers who are finding it more difficult to balance work and non-work, a manageable workload and flexibility in work hours and schedules are the most sought-after changes. Some workers already have these and are able to balance work and life to their advantage. And for other workers, changes in their personal and family life may be making it easier, or harder, to achieve this goal in coming years. So in future, employers need to open up employee communication channels, including regular surveys, in order to fully understand the changing needs of different groups in their workforce.

Addressing the sources of heavy workloads is critical to finding a solution to work-life balance, yet this is complicated by the engrained patterns of long work hours documented in the worker survey. Imagining a future high-quality workplace, it would be one in which all workers have more personal control over their work demands and in which workloads are more efficiently and equitably distributed. This

could be the key to unlocking greater productivity, given diminishing returns often associated with long work hours and heavy workloads. One of the most helpful tools in this regard is more rigorous planning, scheduling and prioritizing of work. Using this basic approach, it will be possible to get at the root causes of the stress and imbalance experienced by sizeable numbers of workers today. This is the direction that any quality of work-life interventions and programs must take.

A defining feature of the ideal future workplace is excellent people skills among all levels of management. This is not unrealistic. A starting point is to identify, train, and reward the competencies of "understanding management" as this is most often cited by those workers surveyed who are finding a better work-life balance.

This direction is reinforced by the employer survey findings. Employers seem to be aware of the importance of hiring, training and evaluating managers and supervisors according to the people skills they possess, including their ability to deal with work-life balance for their employees. However, there are many who have invested little or nothing in developing people skills. In the last fiscal year prior to the

How can an organization tackle stress when the most stressed—and most time-deprived—are the very managers and professionals who should be leading the way to solutions?

survey, 40 percent of employers had not provided managers and supervisors with training in people skills. Only 26 percent of the organizations surveyed had offered this training for more than three-quarters of their managers and supervisors. Organizations that succeed in providing the right incentives and resources for managers at all levels to become more supportive of employee needs, especially work-life balance, will be better positioned in what is shaping up to be a highly competitive market for talent. In short, this is one of the building blocks of a successful strategy for recruiting, developing, retaining and engaging the workforce of the future.

Work-related stress is pervasive in Canadian workplaces, based on self-reports of worker survey respondents. Skeptics may dismiss this evidence as ‘subjective’, but the fact is that if people perceive a job problem to be real for them, it will have real consequences. Furthermore, self-reports are the most common form of data used in epidemiological studies

**40%** of employers had not provided managers and supervisors with training in people skills.

**Only 26%** of the organizations surveyed offered this training for more than three-quarters of their managers and supervisors.

of the causes and consequence of work stress. So the above findings must be taken seriously. And indeed, a good number of employers are doing just this. One-third of employers reported that job stress had become a more pervasive problem in the recent past.

With a sizeable number of employers aware of the problems created by stress and work-life imbalance, why is there not more action to address quality of work life issues? Part of the answer is that few employers know the costs of these problems. For example, the employer survey found that only 13 per cent of all employers say that they are actively measuring the cost of employee stress. But perhaps a much larger barrier to progress is who is under the most pressure to work these days. How can an organization tackle stress when the most stressed—and most time-deprived—are the very managers and professionals who should be leading the way to solutions?

Surely this should be the first item on the agenda of the next senior management meeting in any organization that takes seriously its employees’ quality of work life. In many ways, a high-quality workplace depends on decision-makers taking the time today to look into the future and ask what they want to enable their employees—and themselves—to achieve. An important part of that discussion is how improving the quality of work-life is a means to increasing shareholder value and organizational performance. Companies that get this crucial point will be the first to create the kind of workplace employees want.

# 7

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graham Lowe, Ph.D., is the president and founder of The Graham Lowe Group, a workplace consulting and research firm ([www.grahamlowe.ca](http://www.grahamlowe.ca)). Graham is Professor Emeritus at the University of Alberta and a Research Associate at Canadian Policy Research Networks. He frequently contributes articles to Canadian HR Reporter and other practitioner publications, served on Statistics Canada's Advisory Committee for the Workplace and Employee Survey, and is a member of the Institute for Work and Health's Scientific Advisory Committee. Graham's numerous publications include the acclaimed book, *The Quality of Work: A People-Centered Agenda* (Oxford University Press, 2000), and he was the recipient of the 2004 Canadian Workplace Wellness Pioneer Award.

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