

WORK & FAMILY

BY SUE SHELLNBARGER

Are Saner Workloads The Unexpected Key To More Productivity?

AFTER TRIMMING fat, cutting layers, re-engineering and otherwise bending, folding, spindling and mutilating the work force, where can employers turn to wring out new productivity gains?

A few big ones are tapping an unlikely source: employees' frustration over their outside workloads.

The buzzword that's at work here is "work redesign," and it has BankAmerica, Hewlett-Packard and a handful of other employers tapping employees' yearning for better balance in life as a motivator for overhauling the way work gets done. In the process, they're pushing work-life initiatives to a new level, with promising early results.

Managers start with a daring leap: asking employees how their jobs could be changed to make their work and personal lives better. "We want to know," a BankAmerica executive told employees, "all the dumb things we do."

Unlike re-engineering, this bottom-up strategy demands that any gains in time or efficiency be shared with employees, usually by giving them more control over their work or more flexibility in hours. Employees typically respond with a torrent of ideas on improving how work is done. In effect, employee angst serves as a source of energy for streamlining work.

There's plenty of angst out there over work-life balance. About 40% of U.S. workers say workloads are excessive, and about the same proportion are bothered by excessive pressure on the job, based on surveys of more than 400,000 employees by International Survey Research, Chicago. One-third found it very difficult last year to balance work and personal duties, up from 28% in 1997.

Of course, an employer has to be willing

to devote lots of time and energy to redesign and to follow up on employee suggestions. Efforts so far are scattered, mostly experimental and not easy to replicate.

EVEN SO, THE RESULTS of some early work-redesign projects are worth a look. BankAmerica reaped gains in customer satisfaction at two customer-service call centers. The 1,100 employees at the Richmond, Va., and Dallas operations were asked, "What is it about work that's really frustrating to you, and gets in the way of balancing work and family?" says Perry Christensen of WFD Inc., Boston, a consultant to BankAmerica. "The goal was to make life better for people and also for the business."

A tidal wave of suggestions poured in through focus groups and an 800-number hotline. In all, 60% of the employees offered ideas for changing how work was done, says Sandy Sindell, a BankAmerica senior vice president. The company snapped up many of the suggestions. Workers, for example, were given more training and coaching and were allowed to track their errors.

Employees were also given more chances to bid on new schedules when they opened up, a big motivator for new employees, says Kim Ott, a team manager. For managers, some reporting and administrative tasks were cut, reducing overtime and allowing more coaching time.

After the changes, the proportion of telephone customers reporting satisfaction with the service they received rose to 85% from 80% at the Richmond center and to 82% from 79% in Dallas, Ms. Sindell says. The company is rolling out ideas from the work-redesign project in many of its 19 call centers.

Separately, Hewlett-Packard trained 30 work teams in what it calls "reinventing work," says Jerry Cashman, H-P's work-life manager. One unit, a Cleveland computer-service group, was bleeding talent because customer-service calls were spilling into all hours of the day,

night and weekend. The engineers couldn't make personal plans.

After laying the work-life problems on the table, the team agreed to redesign schedules, with volunteers working Friday through Monday and others working on weekdays. The engineers stopped jumping ship, and Barbara Miller of Artemis Management, a Mill Valley, Calif., consultant to Hewlett-Packard, says customer-response times improved as well. Other H-P engineer groups are taking similar steps.

IN ANOTHER SIGN that work-life initiatives are increasingly a two-way street, employers are tying such popular programs as flexible scheduling to meeting work goals. At Deloitte & Touche's Pittsburgh office, auditors on part-time schedules are expected to step up the pace during tax season, in return for more time off in slack periods. The setup saves Deloitte plenty in tax-season overtime and training costs for temps, says Stan Russell, managing partner of the office.

You're likely to hear more about work redesign. Case studies of how executives of six big companies are pursuing a "dual agenda" of improving both output and employees' work-life balance will be aired in June at a meeting in Philadelphia of the Wharton Work/Life Roundtable, a group of academics and managers.

One computer-equipment maker, for example, is trying to reduce burnout while cutting product-to-market time. In a Harvard Business Review article in November, co-organizers of the Roundtable, including Stewart Friedman, director of the Wharton School's Work/Life Integration project, assert that pursuing this dual agenda is something good managers do instinctively.

All the projects hold promise for making the workplace a more humane and efficient environment. In the process, as I'll report in next week's column, several employers are uprooting some of the enduring myths that support overwork.