



Tales From the Overworked

Survivors Guilt and Overwhelming Workloads for Left-Behind Workers

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Kristina didn't sign up for this.

The Oklahoma woman is the childcare director at her local YMCA. Lately, however, a staffing shortage at the chapter has forced Kristina to pitch in and help with other work, like advising members on how to use gym equipment.

"It's really tough," said the 28-year-old, who professed to having no interest in exercise. "It's like, 'OK, if you don't do it, who is going to do it?' and that just adds to your stress."

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Hundreds of miles away, Meagan, 27, a funeral home office manager in Ohio, has a more morbid story to tell. Cost-cutting by her employer has meant that Meagan is sometimes tasked with applying makeup to and styling hair on the deceased.

"I hate it!" she wrote in a message to ABCNews.com. "I don't enjoy being around dead people, but I respect them and their family, so I just deal with it."

As recession-wary [businesses continue to slash jobs](#) and more [Americans struggle with unemployment](#), those who are fortunate enough to stay employed are grappling with their own problems: fear, frustration and, of course, more work.

"Employees are faced with doing more with less. That's like the mantra when you survive the layoffs," said Jenny Schade, the president of JRS Consulting, a management and marketing consulting firm in Chicago. "The organization is often so focused on getting through the layoffs that they don't determine in advance how the remaining employees are going to do all the work that everybody was doing to begin with."

Schade, a trained therapist who has worked with more than 1,000 employees at companies undergoing layoffs, calls these remaining employees the "working wounded."

"What you have is employees who have a form of survivor's guilt -- they made it through the layoffs, they've seen their colleagues lose their jobs, they feel guilty about this, and they're faced with a huge workload," she said. "It's demoralizing."

"Survivor's guilt" and low morale may be especially prevalent within the auto industry, [where thousands of layoffs](#) have left remaining industry workers reeling.

High Expectations, Low Morale

"I find it really hard to complain about an extra workload when so many great employees have been let go," said Laura, an employee at a Michigan auto supply company who, like others interviewed for this story, declined to give her last name for fear of endangering her job.

What makes life especially difficult, Laura said in a message to ABCNews.com, is that her managers' expectations remain high. They want "miracles," she said.

"There just aren't enough hours in the day to get it all done. & The stress of that alone has been rough enough but add to the fact that each day you wonder if you'll be the next to be let go. It's just getting to be too much," she said.

Sometimes the extra work that employees are asked to do falls largely outside their job descriptions. That's the case for Meagan and Kristina.

Kristina, who said she earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education, feels woefully underqualified when advising customers on exercise.

"You almost kind of feel like a fraud when you're telling them all these things they should be doing," she said. "They're like, 'Oh, you work here, you should know.' But really, I don't have all the information."

Executives and managers, too, haven't escaped doing extra work as their companies grapple with staffing shortages. Sometimes it's simply a matter of executives learning to make their own photocopies. Other times, it's more extreme, as in the case of Larry Herder.

Herder, 60, is the president and owner of Rolar Products, which makes refrigeration equipment and other products in Muskegon Heights, Mich.

During the years, tough times have forced Herder to shrink his payroll from 20 employees to seven. Herder said that he's also cut employee hours so he could afford to keep more workers. But the firm's janitor got not such reprieve; he was laid off about four years ago.

Now Herder and his remaining employees take turns cleaning the company's bathrooms. Herder shares other odd jobs with his employees too.

"I run machinery, I sweep the floors, I drive forklift, I load and unload trucks," he said.

Opportunities Amid the Gloom?

Herder said that by taking on multiple responsibilities himself, he's making it more palatable for his employees to do the same.

"You lead by example," he said. "I've always have done that."

Herder's example, of course, isn't an enviable one. The Michigan man said he's stretched thin and stressed by the impact of the recession on his business.

Some, however, are actually finding the recession to be a boon to their careers. When Cinzia Designs, a design firm in Scottsdale, Ariz., sought to cut costs by asking employees -- instead of outside designers -- to create a new collection of sunglasses, Lindsey Reisack and Megan Brown jumped at the chance.



Lindsey Reisack helped create a sunglass collection while juggling her public relations duties at Cinzia Designs, an Arizona design firm./Photo courtesy of Cinzia Designs.

Brown, 33, who works as the firm's liaison to manufacturers, and Reisack, 26, a public relations coordinator, both attended design schools. The opportunity to design a sunglass collection, they said, gave them more experience in the field for which they trained.

"It's a very cool thing to have on your resume," Brown said.

That helps explain why the women, who said they could have opted out of the sunglasses assignment, spent several extra hours a week working on the new collection while continuing to do their own full-time jobs without extra pay.

"It's just something we're very passionate about," Reisack said.

Schade said that others, too, could find the upside to working at a short-staffed company.

"I'm telling employees to stretch out of their comfort zone; this can be an opportunity to gain some new expertise," she said. "It's a time to stand out."

Asking for Help

When employees feel truly underqualified to handle assignments, as Kristina, the childcare director tasked with advising at a fitness center, does, they can do their own research or may consider asking management for additional training, Schade said.

At the very least, Schade said, "it's certainly appropriate to ask for a briefing."

When you're feeling overworked generally, Schade recommends asking your supervisor -- without complaining -- to help you set priorities for your tasks. Having that discussion, she said, can help you organize your workload, and it's "also going to point out to your boss all the work that you're doing and how valuable you are."

If your supervisor is unreceptive or difficult to approach, you can reach out for help from another superior at the company, someone with whom you can develop a mentoring relationship, she said.

If the workload remains overwhelming, she said, it may be time to start planning for another job. Even in this economy, attending night school, pursuing other forms of training and networking can help you find new work, Schade said.

"Focus on making a plan," she said.

Today's economy "makes people feel a lack of control and powerless," she said. "What you want people to do is get on top of it, because when you feel empowered, that's when you can take action and take care of yourself."

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