

Your Co-Workers Might Be Killing You

Hours don't affect health much—but unsupportive colleagues do

The typical American will spend about 15% of his or her lifetime working at the office. Given this expanse of hours, it's not surprising that the details of our job can have a profound impact on our health.

Traditionally, researchers have focused on the ways in which different kinds of labor affect the body, investigating the hazards associated with activities such as coal mining, truck driving and professional football.

Men's health improves with more control at work, according to new research, while the opposite is true for women.



In recent years, however, it has become clear that even seemingly safe workplaces can negatively influence well-being. This is largely because jobs don't just take a physical toll—they also exact a mental price. When people experience chronic levels of stress—and this is precisely what happens when our workplace is unpleasant or demanding—their risk of suffering from a long list of ailments, such as Alzheimer's, heart disease, depression and even the common cold, is dramatically increased. In fact, numerous studies of human longevity in developed countries have found that "psychosocial" factors, such as work-related stress, are the single most important variable in determining the length of a life. It's not that genes and risk factors don't matter. It's that

levels of stress matter more.

The most recent demonstration of this comes from a new study led by Arie Shirom at Tel Aviv University, which examined the impact of the workplace on the health of individuals. The researchers tracked 820 adults for 20 years, starting with a routine health examination in 1988. The subjects worked in various professions, from finance to manufacturing to health care. They were interviewed repeatedly about conditions at their jobs, from the behavior of the boss to the collegiality of their colleagues. Over the ensuing decades, their health was closely monitored.

The first thing the researchers discovered is that a lot of the variables they assumed would matter had no measurable impact. The number of hours a person spent at the office didn't affect his or her longevity, nor did the niceness of the boss.

Instead, the Israeli scientists found that the factor most closely linked to health was the support of co-workers: Less-kind colleagues were associated with a higher risk of dying. While this correlation might not be surprising, the magnitude of the effect is unsettling. According to the data, middle-age workers with little or no "peer social support" in the workplace were 2.4 times more likely to die during the study.

But that wasn't the only noteworthy finding. The researchers also complicated longstanding ideas about the relationship between the amount of control experienced by employees and their long-term health. Numerous studies have found that the worst kind of workplace stress occurs when people have little say over their day. These employees can't choose their own projects or even decide which tasks to focus on first. Instead, they must always follow the orders of someone else. They feel like tiny cogs in a vast corporate machine.

Sure enough, this new study found that a lack of control at the office was deadly—but only for men. While male workers consistently fared better when they had some autonomy, female workers actually fared worse. Their risk of mortality was increased when they were put in positions with more control.

While it remains unclear what's driving this unexpected effect, one possibility is that motherhood transforms control at the office—normally, a stress reducer—into a cause of anxiety. After all, having a modicum of control means that women must constantly navigate the tensions between work and family. Should they stay late at their job? Or go home and help take care of the kids? This choice is so stressful that it appears to increase the risk of death.

Obviously, this relatively small longitudinal study is just a first draft. We don't know if these dismal correlations generalize to other countries, or if the gender differences will fade with time. (In a fairer world, men and women would be equally conflicted about choosing between work and home.) Nevertheless, the research is a stark reminder that our workplace has a huge impact on our health. How we make a living helps determine how long we live.

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