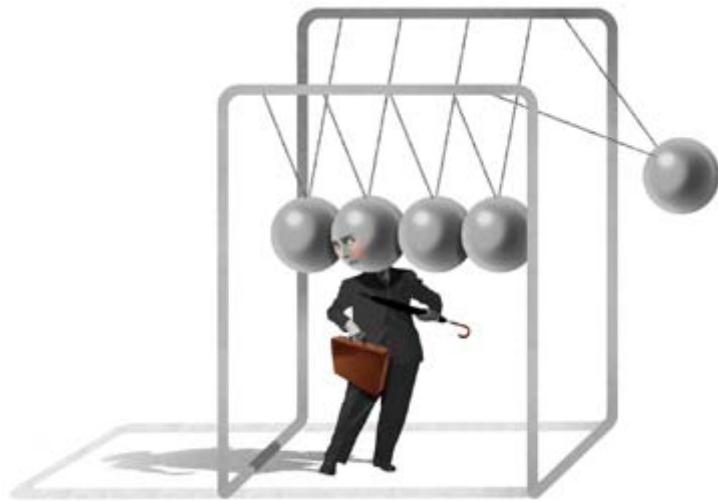


Hating what you do

Disenchantment with work is growing. What can be done about it?



Suicide, proclaimed Albert Camus in "The Myth of Sisyphus", is the only serious philosophical problem. In France at the moment it is also a serious management problem. A spate of attempted and successful suicides at France Telecom—many of them explicitly prompted by troubles at work—has sparked a national debate about life in the modern corporation. One man stabbed himself in the middle of a meeting (he survived). A woman leapt from a fourth-floor office window after sending a suicidal e-mail to her father: "I have decided to kill myself tonight...I can't take the new reorganisation." In all, 24 of the firm's employees have taken their own lives since early 2008—and this grisly tally follows similar episodes at other pillars of French industry including Renault, Peugeot and EDF (see article).

There are some parochial reasons for this melancholy trend. France Telecom is making the difficult transition from state monopoly to multinational company. It has shed 22,000 jobs since 2006, but two-thirds of the remaining workers enjoy civil-service-like job-security. This is forcing it to pursue a toxic strategy: teaching old civil servants new tricks while at the same time putting new hires on short-term contracts. Yet the problem is not confined to France. America's Bureau of Labour Statistics calculates that work-related suicides increased by 28% between 2007 and 2008, although the rate is lower than in Europe. And suicide is only the tip of an iceberg of work-related unhappiness.

A survey by the Centre for Work-Life Policy, an American consultancy, found that between June 2007 and December 2008 the proportion of employees who professed loyalty to their employers slumped from 95% to 39%; the number voicing trust in them fell from 79% to 22%. A more recent survey by DDI, another American consultancy, found that more than half of respondents described their job as "stagnant", meaning that they had nothing interesting to do and little hope of promotion. Half of these "stagnators" planned to look for another job as soon as the economy improved. People are both clinging on to their current jobs, however much they dislike them, and dreaming of moving when the economy improves. This is taking a toll on both short-term productivity and long-term competitiveness: the people most likely to move when things look up are high-flyers who feel that their talents are being ignored.

The most obvious reason for the rise in unhappiness is the recession, which is destroying jobs at a startling rate and spreading anxiety throughout the workforce. But the recession is also highlighting longer-term problems. Unhappiness seems to be particularly common in car companies, which suffer from global overcapacity, and telecoms companies, which are being buffeted by a technological revolution. In a survey of its workers in 2008, France Telecom

found that two-thirds of them reported being "stressed out" and a sixth reported being in "distress".

A second source of misery is the drive to improve productivity, which is typically accompanied by an obsession with measuring performance. Giant retailers use "workforce management" software to monitor how many seconds it takes to scan the goods in a grocery cart, and then reward the most diligent workers with prime working hours. The public sector, particularly in Britain, is awash with inspectorates and performance targets. Taylorism, which Charlie Chaplin lampooned so memorably in "Modern Times", has spread from the industrial to the post-industrial economy. In Japan some firms even monitor whether their employees smile frequently enough at customers.

A more subtle problem lies in the mixed messages that companies send about loyalty and commitment. Many firms—particularly successful ones—demand extraordinary dedication from their employees. (Microsoft, according to an old joke, offers flexitime: "You can work any 18-hour shift that you want.") Some provide perks that are intended to make the office feel like a second home. But companies also reserve the right to trim their workforce at the first sign of trouble. Most employees understand that their firms do not feel much responsibility to protect jobs. But they nevertheless find it wrenching to leave a post that has consumed so much of their lives.

Engineering joy

Can anything be done about this epidemic of unhappiness? There are some people, particularly in Europe, who think that it strengthens the case for expanding workers' rights. But doing so will not end the upheaval wrought by technological innovation in the telecoms sector or overcapacity in the car industry. And the situation in France Telecom was exacerbated by the fact that so many workers were unsackable. The solution to the problem, in so far as there is one, lies in the hands of managers and workers rather than governments.

Companies need to do more than pay lip service to the human side of management. They also need to learn from the well-documented mistakes of others (France Telecom has belatedly hired Technologia, a consultancy which helped Renault with its suicide problem). Bob Sutton of Stanford University argues that companies need to do as much as possible to come clean with workers, even if that means confirming bad news. He also warns that bosses need to be careful about the signals they send: in times of great stress ill thought-out turns of phrase can lead to a frenzy of anxiety and speculation.

As for the workers, the habit of battening down the hatches, which so irritates many companies, may be a sensible response to economic turmoil. In the longer term workers can take comfort from the fact that history may be on their side: in the rich world, low birth rates, an impending surge in retirements and caps on immigration could reduce the number of people of working age by 20-40%. Today's unhappy workers may one day be able to exercise the ultimate revenge, by taking their services elsewhere.

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