# WORKPLACE TOXICITY

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Two years ago, the death of a Uber software engineer drawing a salary of over US$ 170,000 made headlines in the US. He apparently shot himself due to workplace stress. Over a period of four months in 2010, nine employees at Foxconn killed themselves. The presumptive cause was poor working conditions.

There are more examples: the Global Managing Director of Tata Motors, Chief Operating Officer of Encyclopaedia Britannica India, CEO of SAP India and over 46 employees of Orange (formerly France Télécom).

Meanwhile, occupational stress related heart disease is the No. 1 killer in Sri Lanka, exceeding the total number of fatal industrial accidents.

Depression, anxiety and stress prevail among 50 percent of employees in the private sector globally. Demanding work schedules, pressure to meet key performance indicators (KPIs) and that 'always on the mobile phone syndrome' are the top three culprits.

The harmful side effects of what we call 'management toxicity' are affecting a growing number of executives across the world.

You don't have to work in a coal mine or chemical plant to be exposed to health hazards. Blue-collar occupational hazards have been largely eliminated following the introduction of stringent health and safety processes in most companies. Organisations tend to pay attention to workplace fatalities and incidents such as falls or chemical spills where bodily harm can be readily ascertained, and benchmarked globally.

But for white-collar workers, the invisible stress at work is intangible and isn't measured. The top two sources of stress are money and work, according to an American survey.

> " Occupational stress related heart disease is the No. 1 killer

# THE TOXIC WORLD OF WORK!

**Jeffrey Pfeffer** and **Dr. Muneer Muhamed** see pitfalls in poisonous offices

A number of recent studies indicate that performance is not positively related to working hours.

The higher the work hours, the lower the productivity for every hour worked. Simply working more doesn't accomplish much.

There is strong evidence that long work hours are hazardous. A review of 27 empirical studies found that long work hours are associated with adverse health including cardiovascular disease, diabetes and disability. Working overtime was associated with a 61 percent higher injury rate.

A meta-analysis of 21 studies reported significant positive mean correlations between overall health symptoms and hours of work.

While organisations encourage management practices that literally sicken and kill employees, they also suffer because toxic management practices do not improve profitability. Unhealthy workplaces diminish employee engagement, increase staff turnover and undermine job performance, even as they drive up health insurance and healthcare costs.

Ironically, most companies have developed elaborate measures to track their progress on environmental sustainability while little thought is given to employee sustainability. Creating workplaces where people can thrive, and enjoy physical and mental health, is important.

If anything is to change, a combination of the following will be required.

Employees must comprehend what constitutes health risks in their work environment. That includes omnipresent psycho-social risks that are more damaging than physical injuries. They must choose employers at least partly based on stress related dimensions of work that profoundly influence their physical and mental health.

Moreover, employers will need to determine and measure the costs of toxic management practices, in terms of both direct medical costs and indirect costs, through lost productivity and increased employee turnover. That will be a necessary first step toward change.

Governments must acknowledge and take measures on externalities created when enterprises retrench people who are physically and psycho-logically damaged at work. The cost of privately created workplace stress has already prompted policy makers' attention and action in the UK and Scandinavia. It is in the economic interests of governments to reduce unnecessary healthcare costs.

Societies need social movements that advocate human sustainability and better work environments, which are as important as environmental sustainability. Dumping pollutants into the air, water and ground have been rampant but lately, people have woken up to fight for a better environment – and they've made companies pay for the damage. Because of public pressure, governments across the world have passed laws and developed norms to restrict pollution.

Employees will have to learn how to say 'no' when needed instead of continuing to exhibit a servile mentality.

The world seems to be creating 'lose-lose' work environments in which people fall sick for no other reason than to demonstrate commitment. They literally risk their lives and health for employers.

So get serious about building healthier societies – the time to act is now! It isn't worth dying for a higher salary!




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