

# **New Directions. Stressors and the World of Work**

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*The world of work is in a state of transformation. The modern global economy is shifting from a focus on “atoms” to a focus on “bits,” shifting from a focus on physical products to a focus on ideas and information. This transformation is far from a smoothly integrated, well-designed process. It is a process composed of bumps and jolts and has created many casualties.*

*Tomorrow’s workplace promises even more of this discontinuity and an even faster rate of change. Reengineering, downsizing, outsourcing, contingent workers, telework-- all are terms that reflect structural alterations in what work is and how it is to be done. These changes have enormous implications for the physical and mental health of Americans. The challenges of the transforming workplace are addressed in the preceding chapters, each highlighting a particular mental health concern stemming from the changing world of work: Rand Conger and Martha Reuter focus on the stressors and consequences of unemployment; Rick Price, Dan Friedland, and Amirim Vinokur on the transition from unemployment to reemployment; and Dan Ganster on key stressors associated with work. I will examine their perspectives and forecast other important changes for the coming decade.*

Today’s social definitions and expectations surrounding the world of work are likely to change in the future. As large numbers of workers become excluded from traditional concepts of what it means to have a job, the identities they create will change. Work and its attendant significance for personal status and self-esteem may be disaggregated by the highly educated but intermittently employed workers of the early 21st century. The majority of workers will be pushed through the roles of job loser, job seeker, and jobholder, and virtually no one will be immune to this sequence. Being unemployed may come to be seen as a natural, transitional period and not an indication of personal failure.

An increasing number of workers can be expected to move from high-paying information economy jobs to unemployment. No position and no specific job skill will guarantee security and well-paid employment. In the information economy, even people with proficient skills as symbolic analysts or knowledge workers will find themselves on the outside of the formal economy on a regular basis. This situation is likely to divide workers into those who have well paid jobs (the Haves), those who have the skills to hold such jobs but can currently find no position (the Used to Haves), and those who lack complex symbolic analytic or knowledge, as well as access to the training necessary to attain those skills (the Can't Haves).

Under these circumstances, attitudes toward paid employment will change. Being unemployed may come to be seen as a natural, transitional period and not an indication of personal failure. The unemployed in the Depression era believed they were at fault for their unemployment, but the workers of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century could have a postmodern sense of identity that de-stigmatizes unemployment (Levine, 1985). This phenomenon already has a name, downshifting, and is a choice of a growing number of America's workers. More and more people are willingly trading paid employment time for a less stressful lifestyle (Nardone, 1995; Bowman, 1996). As this trend continues, it may help mitigate the stressors created by the frenetic pace of change in work and jobs.

A post-industrial perspective is forming in which people will expect to make identity shifts. In fact, attempting to maintain a stable, coherent identity in an economy dominated by continuous change may be maladaptive and actually generate rather than relieve stress. Individuals who are too consistent in their identities and reactions are probably immured in inflexible environments. In the future, identity recreation will be adaptive, and identity constancy will be dysfunctional (Anderson, 1995).

During the transition to the information age economy, people can be expected to continue to pursue the receding industrial jobs of the 20th Century. As they do so, programs such as the JOBS described by Price, Vinokur and Friedland will provide them with valuable job-seeking skills. Nonetheless, researchers and mental health professionals must remain aware of the stress that can be created by attempting to apply Industrial Age tools to an information economy. Both, corporations and individuals will need to adjust continually to a transforming work environment (Collins & Perras, 1994). Therefore, a future-oriented perspective and futures studies should be an integral part of any training program.

For example, how job-seeking skills are obtained will change. Information technologies, which will include on-line, video-based interactive expert systems, will augment learning of the face-to-face interactions in the JOBS program, such as market appraisal and the search for potential employment opportunities. Through these computer programs on job skills training, more of the unemployed will have access to the information they need to re-assert themselves in the workforce.

One of the challenges is to ensure that those who can learn job search skills also have the skills to perform jobs in the global information economy of the early 21st Century. Fortunately, some of the skills addressed by Price, Vinokur and Friedland will have value for tomorrow's workers. For example, the JOBS program's emphasis on learning and personal mastery can provide tomorrow's workers with key skills. Because jobs are changing so rapidly, learning particular skills is perhaps less important than learning how to learn and having confidence in oneself (Swobodar, 1996). Price and his colleagues thoughtfully address the resources needed to conduct such life course training. They identify the differing benefits received by high- and low-risk participants and the attributes of an organization ready to undertake such training. Hypothetically, the positive mental health benefits of the JOBS training program will apply in many cases.

The sophisticated job search tools that will be available in the future may simplify the role of job searcher, eliminating many of the challenges that today's job seekers face. For example, sophisticated electronic searching tools will be available to employers and job seekers will change the way "matches" are discovered. Search programs will be launched into electronic databases to retrieve resumes that meet established criteria. One already existing group, On Line Solutions (Careerpro1@aol.com), helps individuals format their resumes specifically for Internet utilities. An employer seeking to add a worker to do long-range planning, for instance, might require 5 years of experience with a Fortune 500 company and publication credits in Harvard Business Review and Forbes. The computer search program would automatically retrieve all matches. These programs, also known as "knowbots" or Artificial Intelligent agents (AIgents), will learn from previous search protocols to automatically modify the search criteria in response to search failures or an overabundance of matches.

The application of these tools will make possible nearly flawless and instantaneous matches for employee qualifications, interests, experience, and customer needs. The term “job search” will be replaced by the more collaborative concept of “job matching.” These types of automated handshaking programs may alter the skills required to regain employment. That is, they highlight the actual talents of the individual more than the secondary skills that are provided as part of the JOBS program, such as clarifying the job seeker script. Additionally, job seekers will be insulated from rejection because the rejections will be invisible. Rejections will simply be matches that are not made via software utilities, rather than face-to-face denials.

These utilities will also advance the capacity of job seekers to align themselves with particular kinds of work. Because the employer-employee relationship will be less geographically bound, broader pools of potential employers will become available. Therefore, job seekers will be able to define more precisely the type of work they enjoy without unduly constraining the number of potential employers. The employer-employee match will become more accurate. Information or knowledge workers will be able to seek jobs that best match their personal preferences. As a result, more employees will bring a higher level of personal commitment to their work, which implies greater engagement and stronger social support, factors that can offset workplace stressors.

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In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these technologies will be available but will not be ubiquitous and so other forms of validation will be needed. For those employers and job hunters without access to sophisticated expert systems or multimedia technologies, third party intermediation will be a likely alternative. This intermediation may come from neutral clearinghouses for employee skills and qualifications that will serve as reference checkers whose impartial seal of approval validates a job hunter’s credentials. Reference validation organizations might also participate in the matching process, taking on the current role played by headhunters in many professions.

It is also likely that the dominant temporary agencies of the mid-1990s will take on that clearinghouse role. Doing so will involve an expansion of services that are already being offered-- employee skill screening. The difference is that in tomorrow’s fast-paced economy, the employer will simply log onto the temporary agency’s data bases to select the individual who best matches the needs of the moment.

## **Job Loss and Health**

The stress caused by loss of employment has important health effects. For the foreseeable future, job loss will be an almost routine part of the modern economy. The lifelong, single- company employment model that existed earlier in the 20th century is gone. Employees are struggling to cope with corporate uncertainties and are changing their expectations about jobs (“World trends and forecasts,” 1996). Global competition, fueled by information technologies, has created a ceaseless pressure on corporations to get more and more productivity from fewer employees. Many of these newly unemployed millions will come from upper and middle management, and they will have little hope of finding comparable positions (Rifkin, 1995). As Conger and Reuter explain, such circumstances create economic pressures that lead to emotional distress. Conflicts in finances can, in turn, lead to decreased marital quality stressors. Yet Conger and Reuter’s work indicates that this is a reciprocal relationship and that marital empathy can serve as a buffer to emotional distress. The positive implications of these marital skills for mental health may be offset by America’s rising divorce rate, however. More than half of all first marriages in the United States now end in divorce, depriving many couples of a potentially supportive relationship in an era of high workplace turmoil (Boyette and Boyette, 1995).

The significance of Conger and Reuter’s work for future workers-- today’s children-- lies in teaching them the problem solving skills involved in generating solutions. The expansion of those skills might be expected to mitigate mental distress, as well as to enhance the buffering effect of marital stability and marital empathy.

## **Job Seeking and Health**

In the future, new technologies will allow companies to eliminate or automate more jobs. These new technologies will also simplify and speed the process of finding workers for specific, immediate, transitory corporate needs. These two features will combine to thrust more people into the role of perpetual job seeker. Not only will more people be competing for fewer jobs, but many individuals will also confront the challenge of learning job-seeking skills. Rick Price, Dan Friedland, and Amiram Vinokur explore this stressor and describe how job loss can hinder a person's success in re-entering the world of employment. Job loss lowers the individual's status and threatens mental health by disrupting an established network of friendships and social supports. It demands that the unemployed individual claim a new role, that of job seeker. The transition to this new role can itself act as a stressor.

In the future, as corporate restructuring efforts combine with the expansion of technology, more people will find themselves passing through the role of job seeker. For some, such as contingent or temporary workers, the role of job seeker could become almost permanent. Contingent workers, contract consultants, or "temps," currently constitute nearly 30 % of the American workforce. By the year 2000, that figure could climb as high as 50 percent (Coates, 1995). More and more people will experience periods of repeated or extended unemployment. When such a large percentage of the workforce is maintained in this state of role uncertainty, mental health concerns may become paramount.

Price, Vinokur and Friedland identify several skills that the job seeker can use to mitigate the mental health consequences of job seeking stresses. These skills engage the job seeker in active learning, inoculate him or her against the likely setbacks that will routinely occur, and enhance a sense of personal mastery. The JOBS program described by Price and his colleagues treats the job seeker role as a distinct identity that requires distinct skills. The inclusion of role identity as a key element of stress management is a valuable insight.

## **Job Holding and Health**

Mental health challenges, of course, do not disappear once an individual enters the workforce. Dan Ganster's chapter describes how the modern workplace exacerbates stressful job demands. The increased percentage of working single parents and families with both parents working heightens the work-family conflict, which can lead to job dissatisfaction. Ganster also emphasizes the enduring nature of job insecurity and its relationship to stress. Even many of those employees who enjoy ongoing, long-term paid employment will feel the strain of the economic distress detailed by Conger and Rueter. The labor saving capacity of information software, such as expert systems helps facilitate a decline in wages and shift of income to the more wealthy (Allen, 1996). Financial concerns will be a constant source of stress for most workers, even for many of the Haves.

How can these stressors be mitigated? Do any workplace trends work in favor of job-holders? Yes, employee empowerment. For companies to keep pace with rapidly changing customer preferences and innovative competitors, they will have to unleash the full productivity of their workforces. To do so, they will need to empower individual employees by giving them the decision-making authority to accomplish corporate objectives.

In addition, the decision to gain productivity advantages through the use of information technologies makes the remaining human contributors relatively more precious. Therefore, companies will need to place more emphasis on human engineering because the failure of one component -- one person-- can be critical for corporate survival. With fewer permanent workers, companies will play an expanded role in developing their workforces. It will be in their interest to keep employees' talents abreast of an ever-changing work environment. Individuals in the highly educated workforce of the 1990s and early 21st Century know that they have the skills to accomplish complex, creative tasks. They will expect-- they will demand-- a voice in work decisions.

Information technologies such as groupware are facilitating the collection of input from diverse individuals, thereby giving more and more people a voice in what work they do or do not do. The speed of marketplace changes will also contribute to the expansion of employee empowerment. No longer will employers have the luxury of allowing information to flow up and down a hierarchical chain of command. The people who are in closest contact with customers and the relevant information will be expected to make more and more decisions. If they do not, opportunities will be lost and competitors with less cumbersome management processes will gain the advantage. Purely for business survival reasons, employee empowerment could become a reality in the workplace of the early 21st century.

This shift would yield both marketplace and health benefits. As Dan Ganster outlines, workers who possess both “decision authority” and “skill discretion” suffer less from harmful stress levels. People who care about their work enjoy higher levels of psychological satisfaction as well as greater productivity. Employees, who perceive that their employers trust them and are concerned with their needs, demonstrate a greater commitment to the shared goals and vision of the organization (Rosen, 1995).

### **Implications for Individuals**

The implications of the three areas highlighted by these chapters-- job loss, job seeking, and job holding-- can be expected to differ for the Haves, the Used-to-Haves, and the Can't Haves.

Unemployment, for example, is a constant for the Can't Haves. They are excluded from the information economy, and acquiring the symbolic skills needed to become viable knowledge workers will be very difficult. Moving from Can't Have to Have can be viewed as trying to climb a ladder from which all of the bottom rungs have been removed. This group can be expected to suffer fully from the economic and associated health consequences of unemployment. Because they are excluded from paid work, they will often seek other means of creating an identity. The stressors for this group will stem from the environment of poverty and will be increasingly dissociated from any links to legitimate, well-paid employment. The people most vulnerable to these trends will be the new workforce entrants, minorities, the lesser educated, and the poor.

This socioeconomic divergence between the Haves and the Can't Haves may have major consequences. As the gap grows between rich and poor, the rich may increasingly want to live a life apart from the poor. The Haves may come to feel threatened by the expanding cohort of the Can't Haves (Frank and Cook, 1995). Cut-off from access to employment, the Can't Haves may actively reject the system that has rejected them. Already we see increases in indicators of such anti-system activities as poverty-driven crime, gangs, and drug culture (Didsbury, 1996). These choices merely switch one set of stressors (unemployability) for another (the threat of violence). Stemming this trend will be difficult, but perhaps such programs as JOBS can enable Can't Haves to acquire personal mastery skills. The value of acquiring these skills may be less in preparing for re-employment -- a dearth of jobs may be an endemic feature of the early 21st Century workplace -- than in limiting the domain of life in which income through paid employment matters (Robertson, 1990). The JOBS program and its progeny may be able to maintain a cultural link between the Haves and Can't Haves. The mental health benefits of such programs as JOBS-- the ability to increase self-confidence and personal mastery-- could prepare the Can't Haves to contribute in a creative rather than a destructive way to changing systemic income inequality, thereby restoring agency to those who are currently excluded from the economy.

The Used-to-Haves, those individuals displaced by technology or a suddenly obsolete profession, however, will feel the stress of loss of identity and status that both Ganster and Price, Friedland and Vinokur describe. They can also be expected to feel economic stress as they are pushed into sporadic, low paying assignments. Their lack of control over the nature and timing of these assignments will make them prime candidates for the "untoughening" effect that Ganster discusses. Additionally, as they become marginalized and only intermittent participants in the information economy, their skills will begin to lose relevance.

Stressors for the Haves will center in work. Recognizing the void that awaits them outside of paid employment, they will feel enormous pressure to attain higher standards of performance. With the shift to employee empowerment comes the expectation to produce results. Workers can expect a continuation of the trend toward longer hours and rising performance demands (Shor, 1992). More than 45% of workers now contend that they are overwhelmed at work and under more stress than they were only 3 years ago (Gillian, 1995). “Stress has become one of the most serious health issues of the 20th Century” (Rifkin, 1995). This concern can be expected to continue into the 21st Century as well.

The desire of many companies to reduce health care costs could have the indirect effect of mitigating workplace stress. Clearly, companies whose management is insensitive to the needs of their employees will suffer greater health-related losses than those organizations whose management is more focused on the value of relationships within the work context (Courter, 1995). Health Maintenance Organizations may also seek to reduce expenses by cutting demand for services, thereby creating incentives for companies to create less stressful work operations. Another possibility is that national health care policy will extend further into the workplace. For instance, the Occupational and Safety Health Administration’s regulations might begin to cover nonphysical aspects of work conditions, guided by validated findings of mental health researchers.

Part of the health maintenance process for individuals may well include personal bio-monitors, small, computerized noninvasive devices that can be worn unobtrusively and that monitor bodily processes and biochemistry. The miniaturization of the circuit chip and other computing devices will turn such everyday items as watches, necklaces, earrings and eyeglasses into bio-monitoring devices that measure pulse, blood pressure, blood glucose levels, and O<sub>2</sub> content. Prototypes of eyeglasses that are also computer screens have been developed. These hold particular promise for bio-monitors because the eye is the only place on the body where one can actually see the blood flow-- it is a window into as well as out of the body. The use of bio-monitors can make individuals aware of their peripheral catecholamines or cortisol levels, both important health measures as Dan Ganster points out. Related advances in the pharmaceutical industry and the Human Genome Project may contribute to quicker recognition of mental health problems. For example, oncologists have clearly linked changes in the p53 gene to a range of cancers. Inexpensive self-testing kits are already on the market, such as the p53 GeneKit by Visible Genetics, Inc., which allows users to quickly detect possible

mutations in the DNA code of the p53 gene. In the future, biochemistry and genetics may identify a tool chest of early biomarkers for stress and mental disorders.

Once made aware of their physiological response to a stressor, people will be able to take immediate action. They may recognize stressful situations as opportunities for personal health promotion and maintenance, rather than merely accepting such situations as unalterable. Bio-monitors could help restore personal responsibility and agency to stress-laden circumstances, thereby decreasing the chronic acceptance of unhealthy levels of stress and increasing the use of effective coping responses.

### **Next Steps: Issues and Opportunities**

Several promising preventive measures emerged in these chapters. Reducing social stressors and subsequent mental health problems can be usefully approached from either a fundamental cause or a mediator model. The following measures are needed:

1. More specific information is needed on high risk groups, businesses, and occupations. Preventive interventions can then be cost-effectively targeted at those high-risk individuals, and their workloads and stress levels can be adjusted accordingly.
2. Improvements are needed in the procedures for information exchange and coordination of functions and activities between medical and non-medical services. Full advantage should be taken of the information-gathering capacities of HMO's and the linking capacities of tomorrow's information technologies.
3. Companies need ongoing information and training for managers, personnel departments, and employees aimed at heightening awareness and recognition of the signs of excessive mental pressure and stress. Until reliable biomarkers can be identified, greater knowledge and new attitudes toward stress and mental health will be the best early warning system.
4. Mental health research and practice teams should be multidisciplinary. Investigators need to accommodate holistic health perspectives. Just as tomorrow's corporations are viewing themselves as elements of a business ecosystem, the definition of health is broadening. Multidisciplinary health care approaches will become the norm. Mental health research teams will include biochemists, human genome researchers, economists, and perhaps futurists.
5. The growing influence of holistic perspectives is part of a larger trend that recognizes the expanded interconnectivity and complexity of modern society. No longer will the industrial paradigm of cause and effect be sufficient. Instead, discussion of interventions will center on

interrelationships and processes, rather than inputs and outputs. As Bertrand Russell (1918) said, “Every advance in a science takes us further away from the crude uniformities which are first observed into a greater differentiation of antecedent and consequent and into a continually wider circle of antecedents recognized as relevant” (p. 188).

6. A desire to unveil intricate relationships will characterize mental health research and will link it with emerging studies in the fields of chaos and complexity. Insights from the study of complexity have implications for psychology and mental health research. For example, complexity theory indicates that seemingly minor events are as important over time as major life events. This observation is particularly relevant to the issues raised by the paper writers about high-risk and low-risk populations. Attention needs to be given to the antecedent conditions that make an individual resilient or susceptible to stress. Changes or conditions that rarely register on the researcher’s scope might result in significant differences in resilient behavior later (Duke, 1995).

Whether a person is a Have, a Used-to-Have, or a Can’t Have, stress will be an ever present threat in my projected scenario. The pathogenic factors in the work situation are part of systemic organizational change. In a global information economy, the transition from jobholder to unemployment can be instantaneous and come without warning. Prevention of mental health distress under these circumstances will require a concerted effort to bring about social and cultural change (e.g., changes in attitudes toward work and identity and changes in attitudes toward mental health problems induced by stress). I am hypothesizing that such interventions as the JOBS program can be an important part of that broader change, and that education and training may lead to strengthened stress immunity because successful forms of behavior will tend to be successful on both individual and organizational levels. Research sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health could be a key component in those successes.

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