Work-life balance

Productivity - who pays the cost?

If the result is stressed workers, the gains are illusory, writes Valerie O’Keeffe.

Workplace productivity is a hot issue for industry and government alike. So much so, that the Abbott government has recently referred the Fair Work Act to the Productivity Commission for review. But what does higher productivity mean in the workplace?

Current talk concerning productivity often shifts the focus from investment in improving performance and efficiency to cost reduction. Since labour is frequently the highest cost to business, the easy and obvious solution to greater productivity is often reducing the number of workers and/or working conditions.

Working conditions such as enough time to do the job, pay, job security, control over the pace and content of work are central to good-quality jobs. Greater job quality is associated with higher rates of physical and mental health and well-being. In fact, recent research by Maureen Dollard and Daniel Nesor published in the journal Social Science and Medicine links a nation’s gross domestic product (GDP) and worker health outcomes to work conditions, particularly management concern for workers’ psychological health.

Furthermore, a significant body of research shows that poorer-quality work outcomes in terms of greater numbers of errors, accidents and injuries. In aged care, for example, the already time-pressured nature of care work limits the quality of the care delivered, resulting in adverse effects on safety, health and well-being for both clients and care workers. Care workers consistently sustain high rates of physical and psychological injury, but clients also experience the negative effects of a high-pressure work environment. Aged-care clients often describe workers as being rushed and not having the time necessary to care. Time pressure directly contributes to increased rates of medication errors, and client falls and infections. With the projected increases in demand for aged-care services from Australia’s ageing population, these work demands can only be expected to increase.

Bus drivers also have demanding jobs. In addition to keeping to the timetable, negotiating the traffic and dealing with difficult customers, they are responsible for the safety of their passengers as they navigate heavy vehicles through peak-hour congestion. A recent productivity gain in a local bus company saw two minutes shaved from the time to prepare for service. This is the time allocated to the driver to perform a variety of tasks, most importantly preparation for driving, including checking the safety of the bus. Coupled with unrealistic time schedules, workers are often pressured into finding ways to minimise demands and so by skipping tasks and deeming “workaround”. Short-term cost reductions may be achieved in the running of the business, but at the expense of unhealthy, stressed workers and potential reductions in overall safety and service quality.

Aged-care work and bus driving are both low-paid jobs. Reducing the time available for doing such work leads to more intense work demands, and where downsizing has also occurred, the existing workload is spread among fewer workers. The result is that our workplaces are breeding a crop of stressed workers, creating a negative impact on individual, enterprise and community health and well-being. In some respects, the costs of so-called productivity savings are shifted from business to the community.

The calls for increasing productivity should not come at the expense of workers’ conditions causing detriment to the quality and safety of the outcomes of work. Improving productivity needs sophisticated thinking focused on incremental systems improvements – and appropriate investment in new technologies and infrastructure – rather than simplistic short-term thinking evident in downsizing or targeting workers’ conditions as the starting point. The results are not just local; they affect the efficiency, performance and safety outcomes of work, reaching well beyond the individual workers affected. Think about that the next time you board the bus to work or visit your mother in an aged-care facility.

Dr Valerie O’Keeffe is a research fellow at the Centre for Work + Life, where she is researching aged-care work and services in Australia. She is also a work health and safety specialist.

Tools of the trade

Whiteboard marker

Name: Shaun Knowles
Job: Study skills presenter
Where: Elevate Education
Why is it important? We run study skills seminars in high schools. Our job is to engage the students about study skills and new ways of studying. Admittedly, it’s not seen as the most exciting topic – so students aren’t exactly high flying each other when they find out about the topic they’ll be spending an hour or two on that morning. I use the whiteboard to guide the students through each tip or tool – I might draw up a timeline with a suggested study plan, or an image I’m going to make a joke out of.

What do your colleagues think? Often we get asked why we don’t use PowerPoint or audio visual presentations. But we’ve all been through those death by PowerPoint presentations and our presentations aim to be more dynamic and engaging than that. Using a whiteboard and marker also allows us to be more personal – we have more than 120 presenters and each has a different style.

Unusual moment? I was at a school a few years ago and the school gave three of the four presenters permanent markers by mistake. You have to watch out for that.

How much does it cost? Under a few dollars.

Any (non-permanent) marker will do the job.

SUE WHITE