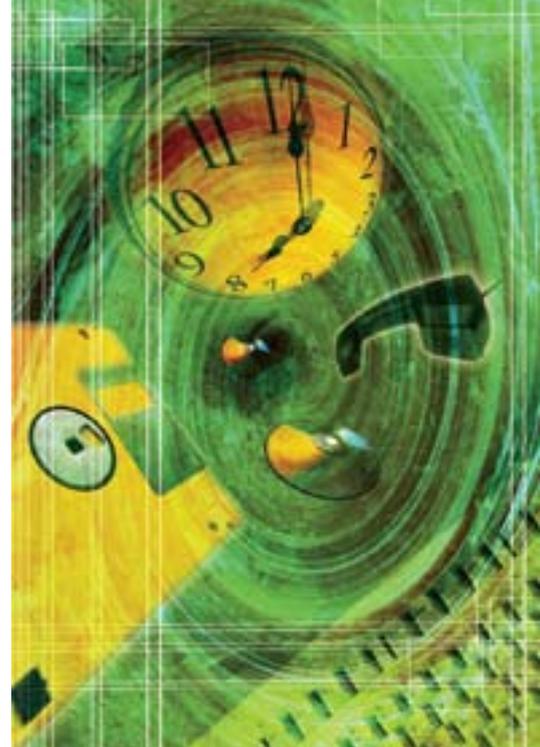


# The Overwhelmed Office: Six Fixes for the Stressed-Out, Productivity-Challenged Workplace

Try these solutions for diffusing stress—and ratcheting up productivity.

By Joanne Sujansky



Lately, you feel a palpable sense of tension when you walk into your office. People aren't smiling. Nerves are stretched. Everyone operates in marathon mode, getting into the office early, working through lunch, and putting in one late night after another. And yet, despite the jackrabbit pace, important tasks aren't getting done.

That's not surprising. There's a strong link between stress and lack of productivity—and the problem is more widespread than you might think.

Busy-ness doesn't equal productivity. In fact, frantic, disorderly activity is counterproductive to your organization's goals. Not only is too much stress incompatible with the vibrant, creative environment an organization needs to stay competitive, but it actually makes employees sick. And according to a recent survey commissioned by KEYGroup®, nearly one in five employees confirms that stress hinders their job performance.

Busy-ness doesn't equal productivity.

So if you suspect your employees are on the unnecessary-stress train, what can you do? Here are some suggestions:

**1. Give people specific, challenging, yet attainable outcomes they're expected to meet.** When people know they're working toward a clear-cut goal—with (and this is important) a clear-cut deadline—they'll meet it by regulating their own workday.

Do everything you can to eliminate redundancies and busywork.

**2. Put systems in place to gauge productivity.** The whole point of goal setting is to help employees become more productive. That's why you mustn't confuse activity with progress. Devise systems for assessing productivity and live by them. Remember this mantra: What gets measured gets done. Create policies that ensure that the urgent doesn't take precedence over the important, and do everything you can to eliminate redundancies and busywork.

**3. Make the workday meaningful.** When employees are fully engaged in their work, they're less likely to perceive intensity as stress.

They'll be motivated and rewarded by their task list rather than feeling oppressed by it. Therefore, give people challenging and meaningful assignments that stimulate and inspire them. Employees today want more than just a job. They want to contribute to the big picture and help sustain the organization through the tough times.

**4. Reward employees after they meet a challenge.** A positive attitude goes a long way toward managing stress. It helps people maintain a sense of perspective and view problems as challenges, perhaps even motivators. While you should refrain from giving employees Pollyanna-like speeches about accentuating the positive, you can adjust their attitudes by showing a little appreciation. When employees go the extra mile or meet a deadline, think of a meaningful way to reward them. Perhaps they would enjoy an office pizza party, theater tickets, or gift certificates to a local store. Small gestures can have a big effect on mood—which in turn has a big effect on alleviating stress.

**5. Make employees take lunch breaks, vacations, and even mental health days.** Do your employees wolf down burgers at their desks while replying to a volley of e-mails? Do they take work home every night? Do they rack up unused vacation days like interest on a high-yield CD? What's more,

do *you* commit such stress sins? If you're rubbing your hands in glee over your employees' work ethic, you're contributing to the problem. Insist that they take lunch breaks and vacations. After an all-nighter, give people a spontaneous day off to recharge. And practice what you preach: When people see you working like a Trojan, they feel a not-so-subtle pressure to follow your lead.

Create policies that ensure that the urgent doesn't take precedence over the important.

6. Start a workplace "health club." Too much stress makes people sick. If you have an office full of overworked employees living at their desks and sucking down fast food, you needn't be psychic to predict what's going to happen. (Sick and/or absent employees aren't good for productivity or your health insurance plan!) Make good health a workplace priority. You can do

this in a formal way by instituting a wellness program or helping employees pay for a gym membership or in an informal way by starting a lunchtime walking group and posting healthy recipes on the bulletin board. You'll help employees cope with stress and also show them that you care about them as people.

Stress is probably *the* central issue in today's work world. We're all trying to figure out how to get more and more done in the face of lean budgets, a global army of competitors, and a 24/7 flow of information. That's why you *must* make the S-word a priority. Mastering it is the key to keeping productivity high—and keeping your organization viable in the 21st century. ■

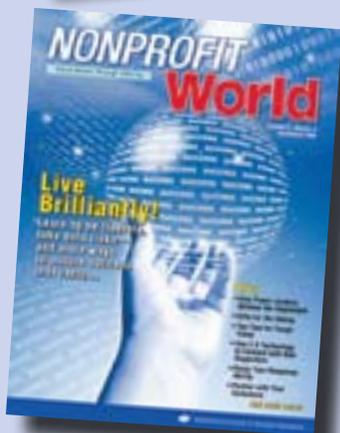
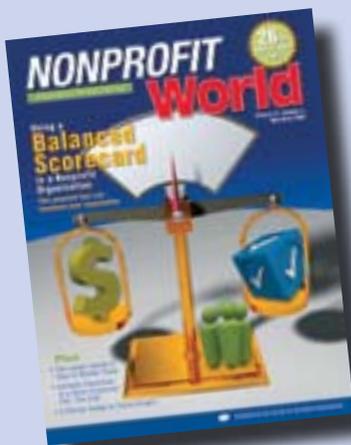
*Joanne G. Sujansky, Ph.D., CSP (Certified Speaking Professional) is CEO of KEYGroup® (keygroupconsulting.com), which is a leader in creating workplace entrepreneurial cultures. She is an award-winning entrepreneur and speaker.*

You must make the S-word a priority.

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- **Counteract Stress to Make the Best Decisions** (Vol. 28, No. 1)
- **Don't Let "Sick" Workers Undermine Your Organization** (Vol. 23, No. 1)
- **How to Reduce Employee Stress** (Vol. 24, No. 3)
- **Building Morale: The Key to Successful Change** (Vol. 13, No. 3)
- **Vacation Time: More than an Administrative Matter** (Vol. 24, No. 2)
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