“Dying to get to work or getting to work to die?”

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ARTICLE INFO	Frans Hikspoors (2019). Dying to get to work or getting to work to die?. *Nowadays and Future Jobs*, *2*(1), 1-3. doi:10.21511/nfj.2.2019.01
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/nfj.2.2019.01
RELEASED ON	Tuesday, 05 February 2019
RECEIVED ON	Monday, 22 October 2018
ACCEPTED ON	Sunday, 25 November 2018
LICENSE	This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
JOURNAL	"Nowadays and Future Jobs"
ISSN PRINT	2544-2287
ISSN ONLINE	2616-5066
PUBLISHER	LLC “Consulting Publishing Company “Business Perspectives”
FOUNDER	Sp. z o.o. Kozmenko Science Publishing

NUMBER OF REFERENCES
0

NUMBER OF FIGURES
0

NUMBER OF TABLES
0

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BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES

LLC "CPC "Business Perspectives"
Hryhorii Skovoroda lane, 10, Sumy, 40022, Ukraine

www.businessperspectives.org

Received on: 22nd of October, 2018
Accepted on: 25th of November, 2018

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DYING TO GET TO WORK OR GETTING TO WORK TO DIE?

Dying for a Paycheck: How Modern Management Harms Employee Health and Company Performance – and What We Can Do About It. Jeffrey Pfeffer. New York, New York: Harper Business, 2018, 272 pp., ISBN 13: 978-0062800923

Why isn't there a sustainability plan for humans in their workplace? Almost every serious multinational company has a sustainability policy concerning the environmental pollution. Companies are obliged to make EIR (Environmental Impact Reports). However, when it comes to the human resources, no policies are set into place to protect the physical and mental wellbeing of their employees. If there are attempts made to ban toxic products and processes, why isn`t there a protection against toxic management systems?

This is one of the challenging questions Jeffrey Pfeffer presents in his latest book "Dying for the paycheck". No, there is no error, the title indeed is "Dying for the paycheck". Pfeffer explains his provocative title in an interview with Dan Schawbel: "Two colleagues and I estimated that about one-half of the 120,000 excess deaths from workplace exposures annually was preventable" (retrieved from Dan Schawbel personal branding blog: http://www.personalbrandingblog.com/jeffrey-pfeffer-employers-care-health-employees/).

These numbers are being put into perspective by comparison to 27 European countries and Pfeffer's conclusion is that by estimate, 60,000, or half the death, and about 63 billion, or one-third of the excess costs, might be preventable (Pfeffer, chapter 2, page 6).

Toxic workplace

But it is not only the physical aspect of health. After all, we live in the 21st century. The risks identified by Pfeffer that are predictors to stress or heart diseases are among others: high risks being laid off; not having health insurance; irregular work shifts; working more than 40 hours weekly; confronting job insecurity; facing work-life conflicts; having low control over one's job and job environment; facing high job demands; having low levels of social support at work.

Looking for causes of these phenomena, Pfeffer mentions the so-called Gig economy. The Gig economy fosters contingent workers (freelancers independent contractors). It is predicted that in the US in 2020, the workforce will consist of 40% of contingency workers. The uncertainty of employees in their hunt for their next "Gig" creates a lot of stress

http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/nfj.2.2019.01

and can result in bad health. Modern working environment is characterized by loss of autonomy and control as a result of higher computer control levels. It is beyond doubt that lack of control and autonomy eventually can lead to higher burnout and stress levels.

Pfeffer concluded that job insecurity affected both physical and mental health with, not surprisingly, larger effects on mental health outcomes. One review of the empirical research on the effects of job insecurity on health concluded that "reductions in job insecurity should be a point of intervention for government policies aimed at improving population health and reducing health inequalities".

Pfeffer argues that many modern management practices are toxic to employees — hurting engagement, increasing turnover, and destroying their physical and emotional health — and to company performance. By constantly downsizing, workloads that in the past were handled by numerous employees now it is done by one or two persons. The consequences for these few people are enormous: like 60-pound weight increase, alcohol and/or drug addiction, severe depressions, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc.

No trade-off

When it comes to the relation between health expenses on behalf of their employees and corporate profitability quality and productivity, one would expect that companies that don't pay that much in their employee's health would have better figures on profitability. The opposite is true, underestimating the gains that can be won with a sound health policy, most employers neglect the positive effect that a healthy employee has on costs on lost production (unhealthy employees are less productive) turnover (if an employee leaves the company there are enormous costs on getting a replacement). That would be someone who is equally productive as the one that left the company. In his book "The Human Equation: Building profits by putting people first", Pfeffer covered the relation profitability and interest in people. If the interest of neither the employer nor employee is served, this is indeed a lose/lose situation.

Why don`t leave

There is one question that Pfeffer addresses, which is quite obvious. If people experience a toxic work environment or a toxic work culture… Why don`t they leave the company they work for? There has to be a lot of dissonance reduction to combine two contradictory notions:

- I am working in a toxic company;
- I don`t leave this company.

The question is what the reasons of people are to stay? There are a number of reasons: economics (people have to pay their bills): some refer to this as "golden handcuffs" (because of money people stick to their jobs). Prestigious and interesting work: some people simply overestimate the prestige of their company and the projected career possibilities by staying in their toxic jobs.

When people intend to leave jobs that are not good for them processes like pride and ego play an important role. Wanting to proof competence (I can do this job) or ego (Am I not good enough?) are important in the final decision. Last but not least, commitment and rationalization are processes not to be underestimated when people stay in their job, despite their knowledge that this work jeopardizes their health. Commitment is a process where people feel they must be consistent. People also don't like to admit they made a bad decision, so people rather stay in their toxic environment than admit they made a bad decision.

http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/nfj.2.2019.01

In his last chapter, Pfeffer shows what can be done about it. As it was already mentioned, there is no contradiction in spending money on healthy workplace, because money spent on this pays back in more productivity, more profitability and better quality, greater control over work, reduction of work-life conflict, perception of institutional justice, a supportive environment – all of these have been shown to reduce turnover. Keeping in mind the enormous costs of turnover, this is a great gain, besides this, it attracts better employees.

In his book, Jeffrey Pfeffer hits the nail on the head by addressing this problem. Independent research agencies like Watson Wyatt (now part of Klein Towers Watson) found that 48% of organizations admitted that stress affected performance. "Eurofound" (the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions) in its recent research finds similar results for burnout.

An extremely urgent and well researched study that puts a very important issue in the spotlight.

So not only for the employee`s sake, but also for the company`s sake, it is a necessity to address this problem the sooner the better, otherwise dying to go to work can easily deteriorate in going to work to die.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/nfj.2.2019.01