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Employed but dissatisfied Stressed, underpaid workers consider alternatives

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Last Update: 3:18 PM ET Sept. 4, 2004

SAN FRANCISCO (CBS.MW) -- Many workers who may have been glad just to have job security during the recession are now grappling with dissatisfaction and weighing career options, according to several surveys.

With Labor Day weekend upon them, families are sending their children back to school and confronting anew the struggle to balance work and life, with some pondering whether it makes sense to continue working when the negative impact of stress overrides the financial benefits, career experts said.

In fact, a growing number of workers are considering downshifting, according to a survey of more than 1,200 people by the Center for a New American Dream, a nonprofit group that aims to help Americans consume wisely.

In the past five years, 48 percent of Americans have voluntarily opted to make less money so they could have more time and a less stressful life, they told the center's pollsters. More than half would be willing to give up one day's pay per week to get that day off to spend with family and friends.

Signaling that materialism doesn't trump all, one in two Americans would accept less money in exchange for more time, they said.

Child care concerns take toll

At the same time, workers who survived several rounds of layoffs may still feel pressure to outperform, said Jim Derivan, spokesman for LifeCare, a benefits consulting firm.

"While their primary concerns are with their family and care of their children, they're feeling a certain dedication to their employer to put in more hours to be productive," Derivan said, noting they're "looking for new and creative ways to balance their responsibilities at work with their responsibilities at home."

Sixty-eight percent of working parents are considering cutting back or even quitting altogether due to child-care issues, according to a LifeCare survey of nearly 500 workers.

Forty-six percent said they like their current job but want to work fewer hours, while 22 percent would like to quit work altogether for child-care-related reasons, according to LifeCare.

More employers are offering flexible scheduling, job sharing, telecommuting, child-care referrals and other benefits to keep parents on the job, but some employees ultimately decide it's not worth the struggle, he said.

"They can't always get to the day-care center right at 5:15," Derivan said. "What are they going to do? There's that stress about making arrangements to have someone in place to pick up their child."

Those who continue to work also often patch together backup systems in case a child gets sick or has some other unscheduled absence, and sick-child clinics are still hard to find, he said.

Career progress stalls

Of course, labor concerns aren't confined to parents and their desire to alleviate time crunches.

Thirty percent of workers say they are unhappy with their career progress, according to a survey of 1,600 mostly full-time workers from CareerBuilder.com, a job-search site.

Forty-two percent of those who are dissatisfied plan to leave their current positions, with 28 percent expecting to change jobs before the end of the year.

"The top three factors we see time and time again in what causes the greatest amount of dissatisfaction with workers are pay, workload and career advancement," CareerBuilder spokeswoman Jennifer Sullivan said.

And this year is no exception. Many workers say they don't see much opportunity to move up the ladder at their organizations, which may indicate that employers aren't doing enough to identify career paths for them, Sullivan said.

Workers may also feel stuck or "compartmentalized" in their positions, she said. "You become focused on your particular function within a company and may not know there's a great opportunity in another department where you can transition your skills and experience."

The top five reasons workers cited for their dissatisfaction in not achieving their career goals, according to CareerBuilder:

1. Lack of career advancement opportunities at present employer: 27 percent. One in four workers said they've been overlooked for a promotion this year.
2. Lack of appropriate education, training and experience: 18 percent. Some employers offer tuition reimbursement or assistance, and workers need to take responsibility for updating their skills, Sullivan said, noting that a two-year plan can help. "Here's where I am today, where I want to be two years from now. Here are the goals I need to make that happen. You want to make sure you're creating a checklist for yourself."
3. Inadequate direction from supervisors: 15 percent.
4. A challenging economy: 10 percent. The unemployment rate dipped to 5.4 percent in August and job growth returned after two disappointing months, the Labor Department said Friday. [See full story](#). But even when jobs become more plentiful, more workers may leave their employers instead of taking another internal position when the time is right, Sullivan said.
5. Lack of support from present employers: 7 percent.

Low-wage work targeted for improvements

Income inequality is another factor resonating with workers and voters this year, especially among people who earn less than \$11 an hour and have family income lower than \$40,000 a year, according to new research from the Corporate Voices for Working Families, an employer trade group of 45 companies covering 4 million workers.

Six out of 10 voters think the problem of low-wage work has become more serious in the past few years, and 70 percent believe low-wage workers' employment conditions are a very or fairly serious problem, the survey said.

Swing voters showed more concern than decided voters over such conditions, but 59 percent of the general voting public said a worker needs an income of at least \$40,000 to support a family of four.

Just 38 percent of low-wage workers receive job-based health insurance, compared with 69 percent of higher-wage workers, the study found.

Forty-seven percent of low-wage workers receive paid sick leave, compared with 75 percent of higher-wage workers, and 47 percent of low-wage workers are offered a retirement plan versus 80 percent with some type of pension for higher-wage workers.

Corporate Voices' employment base represents a small percentage of the 137 million private-sector American workers, 69 million of whom work in small or midsize enterprises, the organization's president, Donna Klein, said in a statement.

"The reality today is that only some workers in some companies in some places have the support systems they need in place to be strong, productive employees and caring parents," Klein said. "More needs to be done."

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