



Workload Rubber Bands

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Do you have far too much work to do than any human being can achieve on a daily basis? Is this a habitual problem at your place of work? If so, then join the club of millions of workers who feel that way.

I view the workload issue like a rubber band. In good times, the rubber band is slack, and people have a comfortable workload that has peaks of stretch and some slack times. As the economy gets tighter, the rubber band of resources gets stretched tighter and tighter until it nearly snaps. In some cases it actually does snap, and people break down from the load and stress. We've seen that a lot recently.

The other phenomenon is that when you stretch anything beyond its elastic limit, then its ability to snap back to a normal relaxed state is lost. If you take a rubber band and hold it fully stretched long enough, then it will not go back to a fully relaxed state. We also see this happening as people have been held at the snapping point so long that they simply have forgotten how it feels to have a reasonable work load. There is no ability to increase capacity, yet in a time where there is a little slack, they cannot contract to enjoy it.

There is a flip side to this argument. I have witnessed people who are constantly complaining about the crushing load and that they simply cannot do everything they are told to do, but if you watch them, they really do have many opportunities to conserve time and change their situation for the better. I know many people who spend an average of 2-3 hours a day on the phone and in face to face bitch sessions with others. The primary topic is usually how there is simply not enough time to get their work done. Hmmmm.

When talking with managers, they will tell me that they do not have enough resources to make ends meet. The habitual statement is "I simply need more people to do the work," yet when I get these same managers together to talk about how they can make

improvements, they readily tell me they are frustrated because too many people are goofing off and not applying themselves as they should. Hmmm again.

I believe the average company in the USA obtains less than 50% of the potential from their workforce on a regular basis. That figure is generous based on many studies I have read. There seems to be a disconnect between how people perceive being overloaded and the actual state of being overloaded. That is not true in every single case, of course. There are situations where the overload is genuine and completely inappropriate, but I believe those cases are the minority.

According to a recent study of 2000 people by Wrike (<http://www.wrike.com/news/wrike-survey-overworking-has-become-habit-forming>) roughly 60% of people feel they are overloaded, yet in reality there is plenty of slack time remaining, and with some basic reengineering of the functions and habits, there would be even more slack time.

The cure for this problem is a thing called engagement, and the road to achieve engagement is paved with trust. Without trust, workers will not reach anywhere near their potential because they will not really be engaged in the work. It has been demonstrated by numerous studies that the productivity of high trust groups is 200% to 500% higher than the productivity of low trust groups.* If you want to have people be able to tolerate the stretch of the rubber band that is so common these days, then work on developing a culture of higher trust.

*Here are two references of studies showing high trust groups are more productive.

Trust Across America <http://www.trustacrossamerica.com/blog/?p=693>

Covey, Stephen M.R. *Smart Trust*, Free Press, 2012, New York, NY

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