



NEWSLETTER

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BOOK REVIEW – “UNHEALTHY WORK (CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, CURES)”

... Work can negatively affect our health, an impact that goes well beyond the usual counts of injuries, accidents, and illnesses from exposure to toxic chemicals. The *ways in which work is organized*—particularly its pace, intensity and the space it allows or *does not allow* for control over one’s work process and for realizing a sense of self-efficacy, justice, and employment security—can be as toxic or benign to the health of workers over time as the chemicals they breathe in the workplace air. Certain ways in which work is organized have been found to be detrimental to mental and physical health and overall well-being, causing depression and burnout, as well as contributing to a range of serious and chronic physical health conditions, such as musculoskeletal disorders, hypertension, chronic back pain, heart disease, stroke, Type II diabetes, and even death. Accordingly, many occupational health scientists refer to these particularly noxious characteristics of work as hazards or risk factors of the psychological work environment to which employees are exposed. —Deborah R. Gordon and Peter L. Schnall ¹

In April 2004, a forum was held at the University of California, Los Angeles, entitled: *The Way We Work and Its Impact on Our Health*. As a result of presentations made during the forum, a collection of the array of work from researchers and scholars in various academic disciplines—including public health, epidemiology, sociology, anthropology, economics, and medicine—was compiled. This collection helped to form the basis for the book published in 2009 entitled: [*Unhealthy Work - Causes, Consequences, Cures*](#). A number of the book’s articles also include input from non-academics in the labour movement and from the business community.

Finally, here is a very comprehensive analysis of what one means by *healthy work* versus *unhealthy or toxic work*. The main themes deal with the changing nature of work as we know it today, and the health and economic costs of unhealthy work, including the negative impact on the *bottom line*. The contributors then go on to provide interesting examples of actual interventions in various workplaces. Such interventions, often employing *participatory action research* methodologies, were aimed at reducing *job stress*, improving work organization and in turn worker health and productivity. The key to the success of such interventions was the direct involvement of workers, their representatives (most often unions) and employer representatives. By utilizing this approach, facilitators (e.g. researchers) gained the trust and confidence of each party (shareholders) who consequently took ownership for the studies’ results and recommendations for work organization change.

Interestingly, throughout the book there is the evident linkage between the notion of “corporate social responsibility” and the importance of organizational health matters. It is stressed that the issue of healthy work goes beyond the traditional focus placed on occupational health and safety in the workplace. For this reason, research into occupational health matters in particular has now become a much more multi-disciplinary exercise. The onus then is placed on the organization— including its work processes, culture and psychosocial hazards—and not on the individual worker.

¹ From introduction found in “Unhealthy Work – Causes, Consequences, Cures”: Editors - Peter L. Schnall, Marnie Dobson, Ellen Roskam (Baywood Publishing, Amityville, NY, 2009) p. 1

The authors allude to “social democratic” approaches found in European initiatives such as those promoted by the [European Agency for Safety and Health at Work](#). Furthermore, the authors conclude that a better foundation for addressing occupational health issues, their consequences and needed research would be greatly facilitated in the U.S. by the introduction of “universal health care”.

In addition, as within any “good society”, the authors espouse a “rights-based approach” whereby there is the fundamental *right* of workers to work that does not adversely affect health or well-being. These rights should also be *universally* guaranteed. This is in direct contrast to the growth of “neoliberalism” witnessed under the administration of George W. Bush. Recognition is given to the fact that the Bush administration enacted numerous measures which implemented deregulation in occupational health and safety and environmental areas of concern, reduced direct enforcement and promoted greater reliance on voluntary compliance by the business community. In addition, the U.S. remains the only country among western industrial countries to not have a statutory requirement for paid annual vacation leave. Existing labour standards are poorly enforced, leaving American workers with little job security and no choice but to work long hours with little time off. In turn, there has been an increase in absenteeism and presenteeism due to the resulting mental and physical health consequences (e.g. burnout, depression, cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, hypertension).

Research and policy priorities to achieve a healthy workplace in the twenty-first century.

In examining research and policy priorities to achieve a healthy workplace in this century, the book’s concluding chapter suggests that the following steps be taken: ²

1. Need for better understanding of the problem that is “noxious work” and a greater recognition on the part of all stakeholders that all working conditions, including “noxious work”, are the results of human planning (or lack thereof) and as such are changeable.
2. Need for better identification of the scope of work-related health problems, which can be accomplished by surveillance at the workplace.
3. Need for more and better efforts at workplace change carried out collectively between workers, researchers, and management.
4. Need for social policies that recognize that unhealthy workplaces result, in part, from the current imbalance in power between working people and management, particularly due to the decline in private sector unionization in North America.
5. Need for new regulations that will discourage the worst forms of work organization and psychosocial stressors.
6. Need for laws and regulations that make employment less precarious and to improve the social safety net so that workers will not feel forced to keep a hazardous job simply because of a need for health insurance, a lack of job security and the fear of being fired if they raise complaints.
7. Need for laws and regulations that encourage autonomy and involvement at both work and in the community, and which will encourage ordinary citizens to be more active participants in the life of one’s country.
8. Need to increase the availability of work, improve the adequacy of income from work, and have work schedules and policies that help workers balance work and their personal or family needs and responsibilities.

... Associating work-related physical and mental illness with psychosocial stressors in the work organization requires going beyond research studies and the academic world to developing collaborative partnerships with labor and management. ³

² From conclusion found in “Unhealthy Work – Causes, Consequences, Cures”: Op. Cit: Peter L. Schnall, Marnie Dobson, Ellen Rosskan, and Paul Landsbergis: pp. 343 - 346

Where are we today and why is this book extremely important?

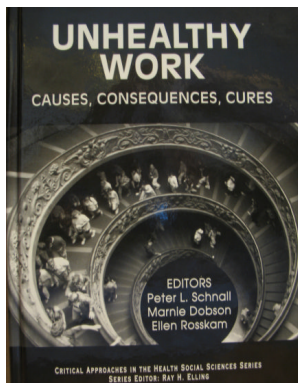
*Changes in the conditions of work have come with globalization and economic liberalization and have included inter alia increased automation and the rapid implementation of information technology. Increasingly, working people are confronting new organizational structures and processes including downsizing, precarious employment, increased workload, part-time work, temporary or contractual work, homework, and outsourcing. The massive reorganization of production in the global economy has had a negative effect on a wide range of vulnerable groups, such as low skilled or unskilled workers.*⁴

Yes, the above quotation is somewhat stating the obvious that the world of work has and continues to change. However, with the recent global economic recession, the associated work stressors are even more pronounced with increased job strain and use of lean production processes. In addition, the impact is now being felt by more highly skilled workers, including high tech employees and managers. Never before has there been such an urgent need for organizations to address work-related stressors.

Although the 2004 forum and this resulting book basically examined the subject of unhealthy work from an American perspective, a number of the findings also apply in the Canadian context. The very fact that there is now clear scientific evidence of the relationship between unhealthy work and the physical and mental health of workers is significantly important. This recognition and the increasing impact of occupational-related illnesses on the health care system in general and on employers' health disability insurance schemes in particular are highlighted throughout the book.

Finally, there is a clear recognition of the need to move from simply addressing the wellness (e.g. health promotion) of individual workers to examining the health of the organization itself. After all, healthier organizations mean more productive workers. It is in everyone's interest—labour, business, communities and governments—to examine research and policy priorities to achieve healthy workplaces. The time is now right in North America to develop and implement policies directed at improving the working conditions and well-being of all workers. As a comprehensive overview of current issues related to healthy work environments, notably within the American context, the book is highly recommended reading for persons interested in the subject matter.

Recommended Reading:



“Unhealthy Work”

(Causes, Consequences, Cures.)

Editors: Peter L. Schnall, Marnie Dobson, Ellen Roszkam
(Baywood Publishing, Amityville, NY, 2009)

Recommended Web Sites:

- ◆ Baywood Publishing Company: <http://www.baywood.com/>
- ◆ European Network for Workplace Health Promotion: <http://www.enwhp.org/>
- ◆ European Agency for Safety and Health at Work: <http://osha.europa.eu/en/front-page>

³ Ibid: p. 346

⁴ “Measuring the Protection of Workers’ Health: A National Work Security Index”: Ibid: p. 313

“Healthier organizations mean more productive employees.”