

***THE STRESS INVASION***  
**The Other Crisis in Climate Change**  
**By Bill Wilkerson**

*(Wilkerson, a business executive, is the award-winning Co-Founder and CEO of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health based in Toronto, Canada. He contributes periodically to Mental Health Works)*

The world, they say, is heating up. Climate change is melting the polar ice cap and all that. But that's not the only kind of climate change we need to worry about.

I refer to the intense changes happening in our social climate and the environment of chronic hyper-immediacy sweeping our email ridden places of work.

Stress, it seems, is everywhere. It's certainly on people's minds and another study has found that email overload is a big reason people feel so downloaded.

Ten years ago, wearing my prophet's hat, I co-authored a book calling for an email ceasefire in workplaces large and small. Now, academic studies are proving that relentless volumes of emails are draining the human spirit.

In 2000, in Geneva, we released a Business Plan to Defeat Depression which alerted employers to a range of business practices which can make their employees sick – sick of heart, sick of work and sick, period.

The first article I ever wrote for a health benefits magazine nearly a decade ago was called "The Stress Invasion." The invasion continues. And it is taking a real economic toll.

Stress is not new. At the dawn of human experience, hormones rushing to the brain of early man alerted him to danger – maybe a saber-tooth tiger. The choice: flee or fight.

The "flight or fight" brain mechanism is still with us, having not evolved very much, but it reacts to a different cadre of risks. In today's world of work, one person's saber tooth tiger is another's interesting challenge.

Stress is a very personal thing. There are lots of variables between how some react to pressure and events and how others do. So, if we think that "stress is stress," we really do need to know what the meaning of "is" is.

For one thing, stress is never all good or all bad – a distinction lost the way someone stole the prefix from eustress (good) and distress (bad).

But excessive, relentless, pervasive flooding of hormones through the blood stream from our glands to our brain can't be very healthy. Enter chronic job stress – and the Roundtable's TOP TEN list of workplace sources. With apologies to David Letterman:

***Top Ten List  
Major Sources of Chronic Job Stress in Today's Workplace***

- Number 10 The treadmill syndrome. Too much to do all the time
- Number 9 Random interruptions
- Number 8 Ambiguity, employees not sure what's going on around them
- Number 7 Mistrust and vicious office politics
- Number 6 Not walking the talk. Mission statement, say hello to actual practice
- Number 5 Fictional performance reviews. "You're doing great, you're fired"
- Number 4 Lack of discrete, honest face to face feedback day to day
- Number 3 Email overload
- Number 2 Lack of control over your own job.
- Number 1 Withholding material information needed to get the job done

The intensification of work climates means "stress management" and "wellness" programs cannot be limited to helping employees eat better, sleep more and get fit. We need healthy workplaces and healthy working people.

Which means investments in employee health must be matched by investments in the health, culture and social climate of the organization itself. Which, in turn, means rejecting the bad management practice of communicating entirely by email.

I am a business person, ex-CEO, had my own business for 10 years, a true blue capitalist and I talk to business people about these subjects nose to nose not heart to heart. That's because chronic job stress is a top-line and a bottom-line issue.

It can impair employee output and thus revenue-generating sales and, ultimately, net income. Chronic job stress can be an expensive, hidden and unfunded liability which corrodes corporate performance from the inside out.

That said, chronic job stress is silent and invisible only for those of us who are willfully deaf and blind to it. Management practices which deplete or downgrade human assets constitute a work hazard as real as asbestosis, second hand smoke and unsafe equipment.

This is the message we deliver to Corporate Canada – not by finger-pointing or splashing blame on our nice logos. Social climate change didn't start in the workplace and it doesn't end there. But the workplace is where most adults spend most of their waking hours.

And what goes on there is an expression of our social values and economic prospects. Therefore, as part of a comprehensive Business and Economic Plan for Mental Health and Productivity released last year – and slated for update this fall – the Roundtable published an outline for a comprehensive stress policy.

Chronic job stress is not just an unfortunate fact of life born of today's competitive global economy. That's baloney. Chronic job stress is bad management, bad for business and bad for people – employees and customers alike.

We lay people need to know that chronic job stress can trigger chronic illnesses including depression – an illness with physical properties and implications for the health of our heart and our mood. Depression increases the risk of a fatal heart attack.

Brain function and genetic expression influence how chronic stress affects us the way it does – but we don't know why. The mysteries of brain function and genetic expression need to be solved. A challenge which unifies the interests of business and science.

We have entered a brain-based economy. One study (McKinsey) says 85% of the new jobs coming on stream in the US demand cerebral skills not manual skills – prompting a steel company CEO to remark: “The minds of my people do the heavy lifting now.”

The brain-based economy puts a premium on innovation, a brain function and skill. This is an economy where employee cognition is the ignition of competitive corporate success.

The intensification that work and life represents is a form of climate change – social climate change – and competes for public recognition with the kind of climate change championed by Al Gore and others.

So, social climate change needs its own champion before it melts our mental health if not the polar ice cap.

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(The Roundtable is a non-profit corporation.

Bill Wilkerson can be reached at 416-552-5937 or [bill.wilkerson@gwl.ca](mailto:bill.wilkerson@gwl.ca) or visit [www.mentalhealthroundtable.ca](http://www.mentalhealthroundtable.ca))