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“The Anxious American Worker” Jobs, the Economy, and a Call for Help

Rutgers’ National Work Trends Survey of U.S. Workers Reveals Deep-Seated Concern About Their Futures

As Americans prepare to celebrate the Labor Day weekend, a comprehensive national survey of 1,000 Americans finds them in a state of anxiety--very concerned about jobs and feeling bleak about their economic future.

The “Anxious American Worker,” released by the Rutgers University’s John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development reports that many American workers fear that their jobs will move to another country, feel undervalued and underpaid, and worry that they may never be able to retire.

Overall, the survey results paint a troubling picture of economic and job insecurity, framed by worry and uncertainty over what the future holds. Consider the following:

- Just over a third of Americans report having trouble making ends meet.
- One worker in three acknowledges concern over personal job security.
- 30 percent of those in the labor force report that they have more in temporary credit card debt than they do in permanent retirement savings.
- Only half are working the number of hours they want to work.

The survey also finds one-quarter of American workers are flat out dissatisfied with their health benefits; a slightly smaller number are dissatisfied with their level of education. Half of the workers surveyed also believe they need more education or training to achieve their work goals.

“Nearly a decade of unaddressed worker concerns is contributing to rising anxiety as many Americans believe they cannot achieve or hold on to the middle-class American dream,” says Carl E. Van Horn, Ph.D., Professor and Director of the Heldrich Center. “Technology, globalization, and reductions in health and retirement benefits have fundamentally altered the way companies conduct business and engendered fear in the hearts of many American workers. American workers are calling for help.”

Several critical findings from the latest national survey of American workers reveal that they are being forced to make fundamental adjustments in areas that used to be considered stable features of employment life. Here are some examples:

Job Satisfaction

Overall change in this measure suggests a great roiling of the workforce is taking place. About one in four workers (25%) say they are less satisfied with their jobs than they were just 12 months ago while 30 percent are more satisfied. Only 44 percent of the work force say they are “about as satisfied” in their job situation as they were a year ago.

Not Enough or Too Many Working Hours

One in three workers say there has been a change in the number of hours they work *in the last three months*. This is a startling amount of change in a very short period. Fourteen percent have experienced reductions in work hours, thus reducing their earnings and straining their family budgets. Nearly one in five (18 percent) are working more hours, often to make up for the work that used to be done by those who were laid off or because companies are reluctant to hire new full time workers in a weak economy.

Job Security and Layoffs

Thirteen percent in the workforce say they have been laid off from a job in the last three years; twice this number (28%) say that others in their workplace have been laid off over this same period. Fifteen percent say they anticipate layoffs at their company in the next 12 months.

Carrying More Debt than Savings

Nearly a third of Americans in the labor force (29%) say the amount they owe on their **credit cards** is greater than their total in **retirement savings**. Slightly more than half of the lowest income earners (51%) owe more to their creditors than they have saved for retirement, compared to 35 percent of middle-income and 17 percent of upper-income workers. And while 17 percent appears small alongside the other figures, this reflects nearly one-in-five upper income workers who have incurred greater debt than savings.

The Male/Female Divide

Women report far more economic distress than men. Women are more concerned about the unemployment rate (52% of women are very concerned, compared to 40% of men), job security (36% to 29%), and the job market (58% to 38%). Women who are paid hourly are much less satisfied with their health and medical benefits and their compensation than their male counterparts. Only 44 percent of women paid hourly are very or somewhat satisfied with their health benefits, compared to 65 percent of male workers paid hourly. And almost a third (31%) of women paid by the hour feel they are paid a lot less than they are worth, compared to 19 percent of men.

Who Is Responsible?

The vast majority of Americans in the labor force now believe it is government's responsibility to prevent jobs from moving overseas (80%), provide health care for those who lose their jobs (78%) and assist people with training or education when they are laid off (73%). In another important finding, when asked who is mainly responsible for helping laid-off workers, only about one-quarter (27%) of American workers currently believe that workers bear the primary responsibility for finding new jobs, compared to more than half (52%) in June of 2003. Belief that employers are responsible for helping workers has shifted upwards to 25 percent, from 14 percent five years ago.

Anxiety Index**

To better understand the nation's mood and the level of distress among American workers, researchers at the Heldrich Center developed an "Anxiety Index," which combines answers to a series of questions that tap the extent to which one is experiencing fundamental dissatisfaction with central elements of work and financial life. Each condition comprising the index has the potential to cause personal anxiety, such as being unemployed and looking for work, or job dissatisfaction, or not having enough money to make ends meet.

An alarming percentage of Americans are experiencing serious anxiety and distress. More than a quarter of respondents (27%) score a 3.0 or higher, signifying an excessive level of anxiety and fully 45 percent of the American public is experiencing two or more of these conditions. Only about three-in-ten Americans (29%) show no signs of distress, scoring zero.

Varying levels of anxiety are felt among different demographic and social groupings. Women with children are experiencing more difficulties, compared to men with children (2.0 versus 1.6, respectively). Those without a college degree (2.1 for high school or less and 2.0 among those with some college) experience more economic stress than college graduates (1.1). Workers earning less than \$35,000 a year score highest at 2.9, meaning they are experiencing at least three anxiety-inducing items, significantly higher than the 1.0 score for those who earn more than \$70,000 annually.

"At the midpoint of 2008, there is little positive to take away from this reading of the American workforce," said survey director, Cliff Zukin, Ph.D, Senior Faculty Fellow at the Heldrich Center and Professor of Public Policy and Political Science at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics and Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Policy. "Workers are in flux, less stable than they would like, less confident and more worried than is a comfortable fit for their efforts and aspirations. It is hard to imagine that these concerns—fundamental as they are to so many lives—would not work their way into the fabric of the 2008 presidential election and well into the next Presidential Administration."

“The Anxious American Worker” is the 18th in a series of Work Trends Surveys launched in 1998 to better understand the public’s attitudes about work, employers, and the government, and improve workplace practices and policy. The Heldrich Center produces the *Work Trends* surveys on a regular basis. (The complete set of reports is available at our website: www.heldrich.rutgers.edu.)

The Center polls the general public on critical workforce issues facing Americans and American businesses, and promotes the surveys’ findings widely to the media and national constituencies. The *Work Trends* series now is co-directed by Carl E. Van Horn, Ph.D., Professor and director of the Heldrich Center and Cliff Zukin, Ph.D., Professor and Senior Faculty Fellow at the Center and Professor of Public Policy and Political Science at Rutgers University.

Methodology

The latest Heldrich Center Work Trends Survey was conducted from May 14 to 25, 2008 with a scientifically selected random sample of 1,000 United States residents, 587 of whom are currently in the labor force. The figures in this release are based on this sample size. All surveys are subject to sampling error, which is the expected probable difference between interviewing everyone in a population versus a scientific sampling drawn from that population.

The sampling error for 1,000 respondents is + 3.1 percent, at a 95 percent confidence interval. Thus if 50 percent of respondents say they have more credit card debt than retirement savings, one would be 95 percent sure that the true figure would be between 46.9 and 53.1 percent (50 + 3.1) had all United States residents been interviewed, rather than just a sample. The sampling error for the 587 currently in the labor force is 4.2 percent, at a 95 percent confidence interval.

Sampling error increases as the sample size decreases, so statements based on various population subgroups, such as separate figures reported for women or men or hourly or salaried workers are subject to more error than are statements based on the total sample. The following chart shows the relationship between sample size and sampling error. Sampling error does not take into account other sources of variation inherent in public opinion studies, such as non-response, question wording or context effects. The verbatim wording of all questions asked is reproduced at www.heldrich.rutgers.edu.

**The Heldrich Center's Anxiety Index combines answers to a series of questions designed to assess the level of dissatisfaction with central elements of work and financial life. The index allocates a point to each of the following conditions:

- Unemployed and looking for work, or working part time when they would prefer full time, or are dissatisfied with current job
- Feel paid a lot less than worth
- Have more in credit card debt than retirement savings
- Feel they will never be able to retire or not until at least 70 years of age
- Often don't have enough to make ends meet
- Dissatisfied with formal education
- Dissatisfied with health care or medical coverage
- Very concerned with job security, or have been laid off in the last 12 months