

Higher gas prices leave many workers running on empty

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Few have been unaffected by the rapidly increasing price of gas, which has inched its way up toward \$4 a gallon in some parts of the United States. And consumers aren't feeling those effects just in their wallets, a Florida State University professor has found.

Research conducted by Wayne Hochwarter, a professor of management in FSU's College of Business, documents that Americans' work attitudes have been affected as the cost to fill a tank of gas has nearly doubled over the past few years. In his research, approximately 1,000 full-time employees were asked to note how gas prices have affected their disposable spending patterns.

They also were asked how these changes affected their stress levels and willingness to participate at work. (Respondents, who worked in both blue- and white-collar occupations, reported paying an average of \$2.83 a gallon during their previous visit to the gas station at the time they were surveyed earlier this year.)

Sixty percent of employees confirmed that the price of gas has significantly reduced the amount of money they have to spend on other things, while 45 percent reported the need to pay off debts more slowly or not at all. Finally, 26 percent indicated that the cost of gas has necessitated going without basics such as heat or air conditioning, or even cutting back on food purchases, over the past few months.

Further, Hochwarter found that those most affected by gas prices were

prone to experience stress both on and off the job. Specifically, negative views of work and the company, sluggishness, antagonistic behavior, feeling overwhelmed and sadness were significantly higher for those indicating gas-price-related effects on spending behavior.

"Most of these effects can be attributed directly to distraction while at work," Hochwarter said. "Those I've talked to spent a significant amount of time worrying about their financial situation."

The research also indicated much higher levels of family conflict for those required to modify spending habits.

Finally, Hochwarter was interested in whether employees felt alone in their sacrifices or if their company had to tighten its belt as well.

"Certainly, only a handful of employees noted that their company changed plans or had to go without because of the price of gas — even companies that rely heavily on fuel for their operations," he said.

Those personally affected by gas prices who did not see the company sacrificing were less committed to getting things done while at work. Compared to those who felt that their company was doing without, those who felt alone in their sacrifice:

- Were 15 percent less committed to the company.
- Had job performance levels that were 12 percent lower.
- Were 20 percent less willing to stay late or work extra if needed.
- Were 25 percent less likely to give "maximum effort."

It appears that misery does indeed love company. When employees have to go without, they get very upset when they see the CEO pulling into the parking lot in a new Jaguar.

"The price of gas has contributed to the perceptions of many that they are simply never going to get ahead," Hochwarter said. Hochwarter's research is being prepared for presentation and publication.

Source: Florida State University

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