

A question of accountability: What happens when employees are left in the dark?

February 21 2013, by Barbara Ash

All employees are accountable for something, but very few fully understand exactly what they are accountable for, according to a new study conducted by Wayne Hochwarter, the Jim Moran Professor of Business Administration in Florida State University's College of Business, and research associate Allison Batterton.

The research, which assessed the opinions of more than 750 blue- and white-collar employees across multiple job environments, had a number of objectives. First, the researchers wanted to better understand how many employees simply do not know what is expected of them at [work](#) each day. Second, they wanted to get a better idea of what work life was like for those who understood their level of [accountability](#) versus those who did not.

Surprisingly, less than 20 percent of employees reported feeling certain they knew what was expected of them at work each day, while the vast majority of workers reported varying levels of accountability ranging from "some" to "complete" [ambiguity](#).

As one respondent said, "I thought I was working on something important ... I guess the boss who fired me didn't think so."

Differences between those who knew what was expected versus those who didn't were considerable. For example, workers who were uncertain of their accountabilities at work reported:

- 60 percent higher levels of [mistrust](#) with leadership as it relates to communication.
- 50 percent higher levels of overall work frustration.
- 45 percent less control regarding the best way to complete their work.
- 40 percent higher levels of work overload.
- 35 percent fewer work accomplishments to the organization.
- 33 percent less social and resource support from one's immediate supervisor.
- 33 percent greater [likelihood](#) of searching for a [new job](#) within the next year.
- 25 percent more job [neglect](#) (slacking off, slowing down).

These findings cost American organizations hundreds of millions of dollars each year—in both direct and indirect costs, the researchers said.

"When employees aren't sure what's expected of them, the results simply just cannot be positive, especially when the complexity of work and the pace of change is taken into consideration," Batterton said.

In terms of reasons for the lack of understanding, most employees cite management's failure to be forthcoming and proactively develop communications until a lack of accountability triggers an organizational crisis.

Leaders are becoming more and more accountable as well, which often takes them further from their employees.

"It seems the more that communication is needed, the less likely it is provided—no wonder so many employees feel completely lost at work these days," Hochwarter said.

The researchers prescribe a four-step approach to dealing with

accountability failures.

- Set up a formal communication system using the most current and user-friendly technology, and make sure all employees are able to use it effectively.
- Make employee accountability part of both the supervisor's and employee's performance evaluation.
- Develop informal accountability networks (i.e., buddy system) that allow employees real-time access to information needed to effectively focus attention on tasks considered most important for that particular day (or hour).
- Make accountability proactive rather than reactive.

"Most employees want to do a good job and contribute to their organization," Hochwarter said. "Perhaps it's overly simplistic, but this can only take place when [employees](#) know what's expected. Sadly, many do not, and the situation appears to be getting worse rather than better."

Provided by Florida State University

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