

Perception of job insecurity results in lower use of workplace programs

February 18 2014



Efforts to increase the use of workplace support programs for employees may be hindered by the impression that doing so undermines job security, says research co-written by T. Brad Harris, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

(Phys.org) —With the hangover from the Great Recession still lingering, the specter of job loss continues to loom for most workers.

But even just the perception of [job insecurity](#) can present notable problems for organizations and employees, says research co-written by a University of Illinois expert in [organizational behavior](#) and human resources management.

"Feelings of job insecurity can be harmful to employee well-being, and, moreover, they may also prevent employees from using workplace programs aimed at improving their well-being," says T. Brad Harris, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois. "It's a [vicious cycle](#) that merits more attention."

According to Harris, efforts to increase the acceptance and use of organizational support programs and establish a clear and healthy work-life balance may be stymied from the start by the impression that doing so could further undermine job security.

The research, co-written by Wendy R. Boswell, of Texas A&M University, and Julie B. Olson-Buchanan, of California State University, Fresno, examined the relationship between job insecurity and employees' use of workplace support programs. It also studied work and nonwork "boundary permeance" as well as the mediating roles of those responses on work-life conflict and emotional exhaustion.

"My co-authors and I came upon the idea for the study because of the lingering weakness in the economy that has left many workers fearful of keeping their job," Harris said. "Specifically, we wanted to better understand how feelings of job insecurity influence employees' reactions and, more importantly, what organizations can do to improve their circumstances."

Although past research has examined the role of insecurity in job attitudes and stress-related outcomes, markedly less is known about the relationship between job insecurity and adaptive behaviors employees

may make in response to the perception of impending layoffs, Harris said.

The researchers found that job insecurity was not only correlated with greater work-life conflict and emotional exhaustion, but also that insecure workers were less likely to use organizational support programs and more likely to allow work demands to permeate into their personal time.

"Our findings are interesting because they suggest a situation where organizational support programs, which aim to improve employee well-being, are not being used by the employees who may need them most," Harris said. "Obviously, this is problematic."

To counteract the decline in the usage of workplace wellness programs, Harris said that organizations should actively work to make employees feel more secure in their jobs by communicating that using support programs will not translate into being perceived as a "nonideal" worker.

"Organizations need to help employees recognize their value, which can mitigate feelings of job insecurity," he said. "By and large, most organizations want to keep their employees. Beyond that, I think organizations that offer support programs are actually on the right path; they just have more work to do. They can start by assuring employees that it is safe to use these programs. Practically speaking, this might be as simple as doing a better job of communicating through official corporate channels."

However, Harris suspects that some managers and supervisors need to be coached a bit more.

"Even if a corporation has the best of intentions, employees will heavily weigh their supervisors' reactions when deciding on what behaviors are

most acceptable," he said. "If they fear their supervisors' opinions might be negatively swayed by the use of a particular support program, they will probably refrain from using it."

But how can organizations handle employees and supervisors who do not buy into the virtues of support programs? According to Harris, that can be as simple as articulating the potentially high costs associated with perceptions of job insecurity and, by extension, well-being.

"Organizations risk declines in employee performance over the long haul, greater turnover and, of course, reputational and ethical capital," he said. "So being able to articulate these consequences can help validate workplace balance programs as valuable programs, not just 'warm and fuzzy' HR-speak. In monetary terms, it's a simple return on investment issue. If the employees who need the support programs are afraid to use them, you're unnecessarily limiting the upside of your investment."

Likewise, employees need to know "when-to-say-when" about working too much, Harris said. They also need to be able to leave work-related stress where it belongs – at the office.

"If they can't, they should utilize the in-house corporate programs to help them learn how to manage their work-life boundaries," he said. "Now, that's easier said than done. I still find myself checking my smartphone late at night, developing lesson plans for class instead of eating dinner with my family, and doing countless other work activities while at home. A lot of this is driven by the enjoyment I derive from my job, but some of it is also driven by my own insecurity fears surrounding promotion and tenure.

"I find that simply being mindful of work and nonwork implications has really helped me to disengage from work while with my family and, by extension, learn about strategies to help me self-monitor. It's a work in

progress, though."

According to Harris, as today's generation of employees find themselves juggling more roles outside of the office (for example, as caregivers to children or elderly parents, or both), there has been an increased emphasis in the importance of organizational efforts to help address the inter-role conflict experienced by employees and, ultimately, minimize the negative consequences of work-life conflict.

"There's always a question of how much employers should delve into the personal matters of employees, but I think they need to be aware that some employees may be fearful of losing their job and that this can be harmful in the long term," he said. "What's tricky is that supervisors may experience some degree of satisfaction, at least initially, when an insecure employee starts working longer hours and being available at all times. And, to be candid, fear is still a powerful motivator used by many leaders."

But supervisors need to think long term, both personally and professionally, about their employees, Harris said.

"Do they want their employee to suffer personally? Do they want the employees' professional performance to suffer? If the answer is 'no,' then supervisors may want to rein in [employees](#) who demonstrate out-of-balance behaviors," he said.

The paper will appear in the journal *Personnel Psychology*.

More information: Boswell, W. R., Olson-Buchanan, J. B. and Harris, T. B. (2013), I Cannot Afford to Have a Life: Employee Adaptation to Feelings of Job Insecurity. *Personnel Psychology*. [DOI: 10.1111/peps.12061](https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12061)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Perception of job insecurity results in lower use of workplace programs (2014, February 18) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-02-perception-job-insecurity-results-workplace.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.