



Conclusions from the MUNASA Symposium on Overtime

On February 26, MUNASA organised a lunch hour symposium on over-time, held in the Faculty Club Ballroom. 92 MUNASA members and non-members participated with great enthusiasm. People devoted two hours to explain their own experience of the daily reality of heavy workload at McGill.

During negotiations on this issue, the Administration has argued that many employees, represented by MUNASA, who work long hours, do so voluntarily as a matter of personal choice, thereby implying that it is not an inherent requirement of their job position. The Administration's position also indicates that they have not yet recognized that overtime and workload are issues that must be dealt with immediately.

The symposium participants had a much different view of the reality of workload at McGill. A number of common themes emerged from the discussion.

The Reality on the Ground

Managers are stressed and exasperated by an endless rhythm of long days and long weeks. Weeks of more than 40 hours in the office are often the norm, followed by several hours of work at home. Some people described average weeks of 45 to 50 hours. During some especially busy periods of the year this might go as high as 70 hours.

This work is not always being done at McGill. People regularly take work home in the evenings and on the weekends. Work that doesn't get done during the day goes home with you at night. People also spend long hours at the university for special projects, special activities and events for which their participation is crucial.

Many people are obliged to skip vacation days, summer Fridays, and other days off, in order to keep up. If they take time off, the work just accumulates and makes the return to work all the more stressful.

Many people are obliged to work through lunch to keep up with the daily load. This is compounded by a tendency for senior administrators to organise lunch hour meetings.

People provide service to clients and customers during the normal 9:00 to 5:00 day, and then service the "system" (BANNER etc.) after hours.

For many, there is no down time, not even in the summer. There is no longer a cyclical rhythm of peaks and troughs in the year. Instead, there is a constant and persistent peak of heavy workload. The more work you take on, the more you are given.

Managers feel trapped in a Catch-22 situation. Working long hours has become a matter of self-preservation. Should they stop working the long hours, they catch the blame when tasks don't get done. They are accountable for the results expected, without the resources to handle the load in a measured and timely fashion. If they continue to work the long hours, more and more tasks and responsibilities pile onto existing ones and the stress gets worse.

Managers are increasingly exasperated because their jobs require a lot of multi-tasking and juggling of demands, combined with constant interruptions during the day.

They are exasperated because the sources of heavy workload are either not acknowledged, or if acknowledged, the problems are not resolved.

They are exasperated because there is often a culture of both indifference and guilt that sustains the status quo, to the benefit of the university, but to the detriment of managers and their families.

The Reasons that the Problem of Heavy Workload Exists

Participants had no difficulty enumerating the reasons why workload has become a problem over the last decade.

- Jobs demands have become more intensive as a result of the implementation of new technologies like BANNER. BANNER has not simplified managers' jobs.
- What used to be relatively simple processes have now become complicated and time consuming.
- Workload has increased because clerical support staff has been cut back and not replaced.
- New academic staff is being hired.
- As part of rationalisation and cost cutting over the last decade, central administrative units have downloaded tasks and responsibilities onto local administrative units. There has been no proportionate increase in resources at the local level to deal with these burdens.
- There is insufficient clerical support staff.
- There is no depth or redundancy in the organisation. There is no one to replace the manager when the manager gets sick, or takes a vacation, or would like to take a course to improve skills.
- There is little or no discussion of the problem.
- There is little or no planning to resolve the issue.

A Culture of Indifference and Guilt

Overtime and workload are handled unevenly by supervisors across the university. In some units there is a deliberate effort to grant and schedule equivalent time off, or in some exceptional cases, to pay overtime. This tends to be in central administrative units with an IT vocation, but not exclusively. However, in the great majority of circumstances, as explained by symposium participants, overtime pay and equivalent time off are not on the issue agenda. They are not even discussed.

The prevailing attitude that seems to exist in most units is one of indifference. There is an implicit expectation from supervisors that excessive overtime is a normal requirement of the job. A responsible employee should expect to have to work overtime to meet important deadlines. (This is supported by statistics on job postings over a 13 month period ending in December 2002 where 46 job descriptions out of a total of 126 state that some form of overtime will be required.)

While it is reasonable for an employer to expect managers to work occasional overtime, the situation at McGill has deteriorated beyond what could be considered reasonable.

Many academic supervisors do not have the slightest idea of what the workload burden really is. They have at best a vague idea of what their managers do. This is often compounded by the fact that the academic supervisor is a workaholic who thrives on a long work-week and does not recognise the consequences of this behaviour for subordinate staff.

Managers spoke of being given unrealistic deadlines; of being required to work overtime while at home on sick leave or on vacation; of being called at home by their supervisor regularly on their days off; of being discouraged from making requests for equivalent time off; of a reluctance of supervisors to

acknowledge overtime because it would mean increasing the number of hours on a project and the cost to the client.

When managers are given equipment, such as PCs, to facilitate their work from home, many still find themselves having to support the direct costs of this work by purchasing modems, or paying for Internet time from their personal home account.

Some supervisors use guilt to deflect requests from managers for overtime pay or equivalent time off. They are told that it is their duty to put in the extra hours; that they are responsible for the project, event, or outcome and are therefore not entitled to overtime; that there is no budget available for overtime. In some of the worst cases, there is deliberate intimidation; for example – a suggestion that a manager should consider retirement if not prepared to work long hours.

It is this culture of indifference and guilt that prevents the problem from being discussed frankly and unemotionally.

In the absence of understanding and in the face of chronic indifference, there is no planning. There is no scheduling of work, mobilisation of extra manpower, prioritisation of the allocation of financial and human resources. Middle managers pay the psychological and physical price.

The Consequences for McGill Managers

The consequences for managers are many and varied. Most significantly, morale suffers. For a significant number of managers there is no longer any job satisfaction, no time to appreciate things, no sense of accomplishment for a job well done. Inevitably, productivity suffers.

Managers get ill. The statistics for illness and disability at McGill show a marked increase in stress related illnesses over the last decade.

Managers sacrifice lunch hour, days off, vacations, summer Fridays, and personal family time in order to help keep McGill afloat.

What Must be Done

First and foremost, the McGill Administration must address the reality of overtime and heavy workload. It must deal with the systemic problems in a consequential fashion. Financial and human resources must be dedicated to the problem.

- A formal overtime policy for managers is needed to establish the threshold at which overtime will be paid. Such a policy will have the same affect as the new on-call policy. It will prevent abuse and force supervisors to plan realistically to minimize the need for costly overtime.
- We must see some real discussion and planning of the work to handle the practical daily problems of workload in all units, with monitoring from Human Resources.
- More clerical staff must be hired.
- Downloading from central administrative units onto local units must stop and must be reversed.

For managers, we have to stop being our own worst enemies on this issue. We must articulate more clearly to our supervisors the problems that we face.