Time-poor workers are damaging their health as well as their employers’ bottom line

By JULIA STIRLING

ANY Australian workers would like to see a shortening of their working week for a reduction in the amount of unpaid overtime they do, or both, according to recent research.

The Australia Institute’s 2010 study, Long Time, No See: The Impact of Time Poverty on Australian Workers, reveals that of the 17,866 respondents surveyed, four out of five would like to see a shortening of their working week, or a reduction in the amount of unpaid overtime they do, or both, according to recent research.

Work has found a link between longer working hours and lifestyle illnesses such as obesity, alcoholism and cardiovascular disease.

Organisations that have a culture of long working hours also pay a price, because long work hours don’t equate to increased productivity, according to RMIT University professor Sandra Jones, an expert in human resource management.

“Measuring hours is like the description I once heard an Aboriginal elder make of a clock as ‘a machine designed to measure its own ticks,’” says Jones. “In a knowledge economy, where creativity is major driver of value, businesses depend on the competitive advantage that is in the heads of their employees.”

Jones says it is in the interests of organisations to ensure employees are not doing a lot of unpaid overtime because this prevents them from developing the skills they need to be innovative and reflective.

“For employers to benefit from employee knowledge, the emphasis has to change from measuring inputs, such as the time individual employees spend at work, to creating environments that encourage employees to share their knowledge. It is the latter that leads to improved productivity, creativity, innovation and quality,” she says.

“Recognition of this has led many organisations to encourage employees to establish voluntary interest-based groups, or communities of practice, within which employees willingly share rather than hoard their knowledge. Organisations that have adopted such a work culture will remain competitive because new knowledge is continually being created and shared.”

Jones says organisations such as those featured in the report would find employees are discouraged from sharing their knowledge because of the resentment that is created by being judged by poor measurements, such as hours spent at work and their willingness to do overtime.

“In many cases it comes down to a question of trust,” she says. “Organisations that encourage their employees to take time to think, reflect, and share new knowledge that comes from such reflection, trust their employees to use this freedom constructively.

“Those that do not trust their employees will continue to use negative measurements such as time spent at work. Those that recognise that trust begets trust, and mistrust attracts mistrust, will find that they do encourage a more creative, knowledge-sharing culture.”

Lincoln Crawley, managing director of recruitment firm Manpower Australia and New Zealand, says leaders create a community of practice only to be so risk averse that it ignores the ideas produced, which according to Crawley is the worst outcome.

He adds: “That happens a lot. You’ll see that on many engagement surveys where people say: ‘I’m not listened to. Management asks for my opinion but does not act on it.’ There is a need for balance between innovation, what-if and execution.”

Crawley says the solution revolves around fairness, equity and sustainability. If an organisation claims fairness is one of its values and a then it must provide people with a meaningful work environment, that stops an employee working regularly from 6am to 9pm, he says.