

# Introduction

## **The world of work in the 21st century: from burnout to boreout**

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Workplace stress is simply part of today's world of work. It seems as though anyone who is not stressed is not important. For this reason, the problem is often exaggerated. Of course, there are genuinely stressed employees who are being squeezed like lemons by their companies. But there are also those who experience the opposite. That is what this book is about. Statements about stress should be taken with a pinch of salt: not only does stress sound important, but it is also socially desirable – and has a substantially higher conversational value than boredom, for example.

The topic of stress at work dominates many conversations at parties. And yet, if the talk goes any deeper than superficial banter, it suddenly becomes apparent that many employees are actually far from being stressed. On the contrary, they

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are understretched, unmotivated and immeasurably bored – with no hint of a challenge or any interest in what they do at work each day. According to a survey by Kelly Services, an international employment agency, the overall European average for employees who feel stressed stands at 27 per cent.

Of interest to us in this book are the remaining 73 per cent – all those employees who place themselves somewhere between ‘stress level just right’ and ‘understretched’. So, it’s not about stress, but rather about the opposite: it’s not about burnout, but about boreout.

Being understretched, unmotivated and bored in the world of work in the 21st century? Now, you probably think this is utterly impossible in this age of globalization. We should be overstretched rather than understretched. Who, exactly, is bored at work? But just picture for a minute your professional environment: do none of your work colleagues leave you wondering exactly what they do all day? What their tasks actually are? Who perhaps even give the impression of being stressed, but who aren’t working under stressful conditions?

It’s worth considering the results of a couple of surveys:

- A poll by the Gallup organization indicates that in Germany, 87 per cent of all workers feel only slightly if at all committed to their companies. The study suggests, among other findings, that as many as 7 out of 10 of those questioned do not feel they have a job that really suits them.
- In 2005, Dan Malachowski interviewed more than 10,000 employees about the topic of time-wasting in the workplace for Salary.com and AOL. The result: 33.2 per cent of this group declared that they did not have enough to do at work; in other words, they are understretched.

Thus, despite all that we hear on the subject, countless employees are under no kind of stress; rather, they actually have 'free time' at work. And the amount of this free time is not as little as you might think. To cite the investigation by Salary.com and AOL once more, the poll shows that the understretched employees spend two hours of every working day on their private affairs – things that have nothing to do with work and for which they are actually paid. They write countless private e-mails, surf the internet for their own amusement, and use the enormous number of websites to help them fill the time they are at work. Then there are websites with games, in which you can score points for races with office chairs, or get tips for passing the time in boring meetings, or brand new videos explaining how you can make a fountain out of a cola bottle and a packet of peppermint sweets. Some bored employees even develop their own business ideas and plan how they will free themselves from their current workplace. It is surely evident that not all of this comes under the category of 'creative breaks in the working day'.

There are software firms that can calculate with pinpoint accuracy how much time can be saved with faster programs or computers. The time lost due to slow hardware and software is equivalent to two workers per year out of every 500. Yet here we're only talking about a few seconds per employee per day. That is a minuscule amount when compared with the time that many people simply do not work and yet sit in the office. There, every day, hours are being wasted because staff are not applying themselves to their actual work.

Salary.com and AOL have calculated that this phenomenon costs the United States over \$750 billion dollars a year; that is over \$5,000 per employee. According to the Gallup study, estimates of the total economic loss in Germany run to over €250 billion. Even if the figures are slightly high, a sense of being understretched, unmotivated and bored is obviously, despite globalization, very widespread in the working world of the 21st century – and its effects impose considerable costs.

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Because many unsatisfied employees prefer to deal with private matters in the workplace, rather than attempting to overcome their feelings of dissatisfaction, one might be tempted to say it's their fault and to write them off as essentially lazy. However, we should guard against that. The surveys about dissatisfaction we have cited also reveal that although those understretched employees are the most dissatisfied, they actually wish that they could be more active. So they have either ended up in the wrong career, or it is the companies themselves that are preventing these employees from taking on more challenges.

The dissatisfied employee adopts various strategies in order to appear busy and keep additional work at arm's length. This behaviour is a paradox because these strategies themselves intensify the condition of dissatisfaction. Employees adopt them because they assume it is more enjoyable to do little or next to nothing at work. But the truth is different: a long period of doing next to nothing at work amounts to endless and horrifying tedium. Merely pretending to be busy becomes wearisome with time and, above all, is unsatisfying. There is no challenge, no recognition. And the employees then take these feelings of dissatisfaction home with them at the end of the day.

When employees are understretched, unmotivated and immeasurably bored, and then actively try – paradoxically – to maintain this condition, they are clearly suffering from boreout.

With the help of the questions shown in Figure 0.1, you can find out whether you or people known to you are affected by boreout. Answer yes or no. Always write yes if you experience the things listed several times a month.

No.	Question	Answer
1.	Do you deal with your personal affairs while at work?	
2.	Do you feel understretched or bored?	
3.	Do you, from time to time, pretend to be working – when you actually have nothing to do?	
4.	Are you tired and jaded in the evening, although you have been under no stress at all?	
5.	Are you rather unhappy with your work?	
6.	Do you lack any sense that your work has real meaning?	
7.	Could you actually work faster than you do?	
8.	Would you rather do something else, but are reluctant to change, because you would earn too little in that job?	
9.	Do you send private e-mails to colleagues during work?	
10.	Does your work not interest you, or have only a little interest?	

**Figure 0.1** Indications of boreout at work

If you have answered 'yes' more than four times, then you are suffering from boreout or are on the way there. With this book you can find out what that is and what you can do to combat it.