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Burnout

Rock-n-roll icon Neil Young said it's better to burnout than to fade away. Obviously, Neil never worked in electronics manufacturing.

This industry is suffering from burnout. The recent results from *Circuits Assembly's* eighth annual Salary Survey suggest that, especially in North America where over 80% of survey respondents indicated their jobs were located, many of you in PCB assembly are suffering from overwork, under-compensation and company disinterest in your career mobility.

Burnout is insidious. It doesn't attack full frontal; rather, it sucker-punches you after months of cumulative buildup of stress and overwork. Burnout is frustrating. It causes depression, hostility and health problems. And burnout is costly. Sure, current productivity numbers are fabulous in countries like the U.S., but at what price? According to some doctors, burnout causes a loss of interest in work after a time—and, at its extreme manifestation, even the inability to work. Motivation leaves, performance quality suffers, and employees can't concentrate.

Let's take a look at the numbers. Most of this year's survey respondents are in mid-career—37.7% are 35 to 44 years of age, and 29.3% are 45 to 54. You're also a well-educated bunch, with about 53% earning either a four-year degree or more. With all that education and experience, one may figure that salary would follow along. However, the salary range most checked by survey respondents this year was \$40,000-49,000. That's definitely an honorable wage range, but consider that, in the glory year of 2000, the "average" assembly salary was about \$57,000.

Let's talk hours. For most, your average *base* workweek is 40 hours. However, for over two-thirds of you (68%), your *actual* workweek is well over 40 hours. Are you compensated for this additional time? Hardly: 64% of you report that you're not given comp time, unless you count "the kick in the behind" one respondent reported receiving as compensation.

Another respondent wrote: "Many employers are going to find that, after two years of forcing salaried people to work 50-to-60-hour weeks with the fear that they will be replaced by other out-of-work professionals at a discount, several companies will bleed the very talent that kept them in business through the downturn. It is not expecting too much of a manager, under these conditions, to ask them to take a few minutes a week and let their subordinates know they appreciate the sacrifices being made."

And that's the key really: Communicating with employees and letting the survivors in your company know they're appreciated and that their contributions matter. Grippers aside, listening to valid suggestions such as the following may actually be beneficial:

"For a company in the so-called high tech industry, we are still doing things the old-fashioned way. Paperwork abounds, and our entire purchasing department

is way too sketchy about the Internet to actually use it for purchasing. [Our computers] are all way behind the curve, too...Is everybody else out there using systems that are actually younger than our children, or is this type of situation rather common?"

"Overall, my experience with my current employer I consider to be very poor. My opinion is that this is due to the lack of knowledge on management's (upper and lower) behalf in the realm of the contract electronics manufacturing arena. The OEM methodologies that were adopted by the current administration clearly do not apply and will never apply to the [EMS] business we happen to be in."

The corollary to all this, of course, is that these folks should be happy they have jobs. Plenty of electronics manufacturing professionals—especially in North America—are without the work they've been trained to do. And, with the jobless recovery occurring now in this region and the outsourcing of technology jobs, they have few prospects of ever finding that exact type of work again.

However, despite the burnout, you are an optimistic bunch. About 59% are either very satisfied or satisfied overall with your job, and 64% are either very satisfied or satisfied with the technical challenges your position demands. Just over half of you (52%) have seen business pickup at your company over the past 12 months, and over two-thirds (68%) of you believe that business will only continue to improve over the next year. One respondent even reported: "If anything, I feel we're growing too quickly. We're finding it tough to remain on schedule."

Those who have chosen to work in electronics manufacturing *want* to find the positive in their career experience, and it's up to today's employers to watch for burnout and find cost-effective, creative ways of retaining talent. I'll leave you with one respondent's forewarning:

"When I came [to my present job], I had a 40% salary cut. This would not be so bad, except this company does not compensate its workers for the increases in the cost of living. It is a Catch 22 because there are limited jobs of this type. Makes me think of taking a new career path. I don't like that prospect because I love the work I do. Signed, Discouraged."



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