

The impact of cars on quality of life and wellbeing



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Work-life balance, or home-work interface as some literature calls it, is a rather large and complex area. One factor that is increasingly playing a larger part in our life and work is the actual commuting time between work and home. While it is not unusual for Australians to spend an hour commuting each way to work, such times are almost unheard of in other parts of the world, especially Europe. Psychologists interested in work-life balance may be interested in understanding some of the factors at play in the increasing commuting times and therefore potential time lost at work and at home,

it's impact on people and how they can affect these factors through organisational design.

To a large extent the increasing commuting times have been caused by the advent of cars, or personal transport and the subsequent city design that resulted from this transportation type.

The car has become an integral part of our society. It is a symbol of status, freedom, mobility and of human conquest of technology. The car has shortened long journeys and offered convenience and comfort. The car is a tool of transport and leisure. Yet the car is a victim

of its own success, as car numbers reach epidemic proportion around the world, the car is threatening our wellbeing, personal health and safety, the way we interact with others and our work and life, without even mentioning environmental impacts.

No where is the impact of the car more severe than in our cities. Cities have become unhealthy for many reasons. Research shows that large metropolitan areas in the USA such as Houston, Detroit and Atlanta which rely on and financially support the use of automobiles as transport are finding serious degradation in the quality of life (Burden, 2001). One of the biggest problems is congestion, the average resident of Atlanta will spend more than 12 hours a week stuck in traffic (Burden 2001), time that could be better spent with family, on leisure or more meaningful activities, such as actual work.

Australian author of 'Reclaiming our towns and Villages' David Engwirth (cited in Burden, 2001) states that

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cities were invented to minimise travel and to maximise exchange (goods, services, culture, friendship, ideas and knowledge) and that the role of transport is to maximise exchange. Burden (2001) goes on to explain that all decisions in cities during our recorded civilisation of about 4000 years created progress that minimised travel and maximised exchange. It is only in the last 50-60 years that things have reversed, our use of vehicles have caused the urban sprawl, low density housing and remote suburban developments allowed people to get away from noise, crime pollution and urban decay. Sprawl pattern development, however, has created many new problems not previously understood, apart from breaking up communities it has made us dependent on high speed roadways as well as enslaving us to the car and the problems associated with it. Aggressive advertising by car companies, government policy favoring motor transport, a lack of viable alternatives and community attitudes have allowed car use to reach epidemic proportions in many parts of the world.

The impact of increased car use on people's activity has been documented. Since 1975 the percentage of children traveling to school by car has doubled to 23% in 1994 which contributes to a total reduction in walking distances by 5- 15 year olds of 28% annually over the same time (Roberts, 1998). The increased use of cars as transport is linked to the rise of obesity which in turn is linked to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, osteoporosis and hypertension (Whitt, 1982). While the amount of walking has dropped by 42% in the US over the last twenty

years, the percentage of overweight Americans has risen by 40% (Kienitz, 2000). A direct link found that reducing walking in a community by 10% increased obesity rates by 1% in that community (Kienitz, 2000). The pattern of decreased walking is further surprising when a quarter of all car journeys in the US are less than 3km (Roberts, 1998) well within walking distance.

The Mean Streets 2000 report (Kientz, 2000) finds that dangerous streets discourage people from walking, this can be attributed to government spending in the US which allocates 55 cents of federal transport funds on pedestrian projects while spending \$72 per person on highways.

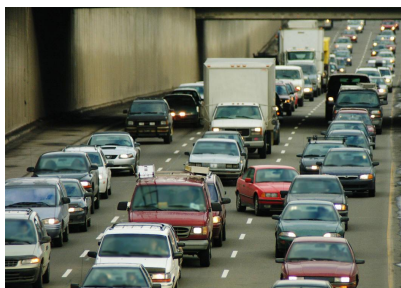
Car infrastructure is not only expensive and difficult to maintain it also occupies a lot of space, up to one third of land mass in Australia's cities is occupied by roads and car parks (Manners, 1999). In fact Australian cities suffer a great deal from the mismanagement that occurred during the automotive post war boom, as many of our cities were being developed at that time. Melbourne which has a similar population to Rome has twelve times the land area. A combination of the vast distances travelled by Australians, our love for large cars and the fact that we drive old often poorly maintained cars makes Australians the biggest vehicle pollutants per capita in the world (Manners, 1999).

Perkins (1999) further blames cars for the negative effects on our psychology, especially traffic congestion creating road rage. Materialism associated with cars as status sym-

bols for being yet another force of division in communities. Perkins (1999) also states that cities with the worst car problems in the world are also the ones which are growing in car use the most, he estimates the problems will get increasingly worse unless serious changes in policy are adopted.

Cars have such a negative effect on quality of life and wellbeing that in a recent international survey on quality of life the top cities were those that relied least on car transportation. The international survey on 'quality of life' looked at 218 cities around the world, looked at many aspects of community wellness. Conducted by international human resource firm Mercer, the survey judged cities according to 39 criteria including environment, transport, personal safety, culture, education and health. (Whelan, 2000). Judging by the list of problems associated with car travel, it is not surprising that the top four cities; Zurich, Vienna, Bern and Vancouver also had the best developed public transport systems.





In Vienna for example, public transport infrastructure is so good that 43.9% of journeys to work are by public transport, a contrast to Australian cities where the figure is less than 14% (Whelan, 2000). Vancouver's improvement of rail services sees 75% of its users being previously single driver car occupants. It is estimated that urban rail services are 250% more energy efficient than motor cars, they reduce congestion, improve quality of life, clean up the cities and allow more human interaction, yet Australian governments insist on spending the majority of transport funds on building new roads (Whelan, 2000).

Despite the problems of congestion accidents and environmental impacts the car still receives special treatment that helps it maintain a dominant position in many countries. In the US subsidies for, petrol, roads, and parking make cars artificially cheap to operate. Low-density zoning policies together with the cars long range stretch cities over large distances, which once again makes cars even more necessary. Planning bias that favors more, faster and bigger roads over creative management of transportation makes sure that other options such as cycling are not given a fair hearing. Cycling is having a renaissance in Europe with up to 30% of urban trips in German cities being performed on a bike (Pucher, 1997). Public policy has transformed many highways in German cities into multipurpose travelways, amount of lanes for cars reduced and speed limit lowered, planting of trees and inclusion of bike ways and walk ways encourage cycling and walking. The modification of road signs and traffic lights, has allowed more

people to cycle, at the benefit to their health and reducing of traffic in the cities. The new bike and walker friendly policies saw a reduction of traffic injuries by 30% since their implementation (Pucher, 1997). This changes can also be seen in Melbourne as an extensive network of cycle bike ways is created. Offering a healthy and cost effective option to car travel. Pucher (1997) expects that 5 billion people will live in cities by the year 2025. The need to move away from auto-centered transportation will become increasingly more apparent.

Many city governments are now funding projects that are being tailored to providing many benefits to the community, these include the development of neighborhoods protection of environment, reduction of speed and creation of friendly approaches for pedestrians and bicyclists as well as improving public transport (Peaks, 1999). The urban sprawl is being reversed with more efficient inner city housing being developed that is well connected and linked to its surroundings.

Organisational Psychologists may have noticed an increasing trend in the decentralisation of business and workplaces away from the CBD. Many offices and workplaces are moving closer to where people are. This can allow businesses to tap into new employment markets, such as mothers, who can work only some hours a day and can benefit from the reduction in commuting times. Many companies are also offering facilities for bike parking and showers, allowing workers more flexibility, reducing congestion and helping improve the health and fitness of their employees. Improvements in technology have also resulted in an ability of employees to do much of their work from home.

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