



Morning smiles brighten work all day ... and vice versa

[By Michael Kinsman]

I stepped outside this morning to go to work and it was raining. The freeway was unusually jammed and motorists were displaying their most unpredictable and inflammatory traffic tricks.

Once I got to work, the phone messages were not good news. Worse news arrived in my e-mail.

And, I was late for a very busy day.

This is not the way anyone wants to start out a day. No one plans for days like this.

But they still happen and they affect us.

That's what intrigues researchers Nancy Rothbard, a management professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, and Steffanie Wilk, a professor at Ohio State University.

"I'm interested in what people bring with them to organizations," says Rothbard. "In my experience, as in the experience of many others, people are not able to completely wall off and compartmentalize different parts of their lives. There is a spillover between the multiple roles that people inhabit."

This is an important point. In many ways, it's one that has been evolving through the years but has yet to really gain a strong foothold among workplace researchers and productivity experts.

It's almost like we're still living in the 1950s, when every worker (male worker, that is) was earnest and seemed able to leave things behind them at home (meaning that all their personal problems were dumped on their wife).

Obviously, the world has changed. Every one of us has personal issues that follow us

through the door each day to the workplace and it's how we manage those issues that set us apart.

Rothbard and Wilk explored this issue in a study of employees at call centers operated by a large insurance company. Their study included customer service representatives, claims adjusters, supervisors and managers.

The two researchers found that workers who started the day in a good mood tended to stay that way, while workers who started the day in a bad mood also stayed that way.

When workers got calls from customers in good moods, their own moods seemed to improve. Yet when workers heard from customers in sour moods, it tended not to affect them much.

But the good-mood workers also showed other benefits. They tended to take fewer breaks that employees with bad moods and were less likely to turn over troublesome calls to supervisors.

They also found that workers in bad moods handled fewer calls.

"One of our findings shows that the mood people bring with them at the very start of the workday influenced employee mood more powerfully and consistently than any other variable," says Rothbard.

"People actually do a pretty good job of walling off the negatives. What's interesting for organizations to understand is that what

people bring with them to work is not all bad for the organization, and in fact can be quite positive."

It also means that workplace supervisors need to be sensitive to the moods of employees who report to work. Teaching them skills to overcome personal issues by the time they start their work may mean for a more productive day ahead.

That's an important lesson to be learned.