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Santa's Job: An OHP Perspective

In this December issue of the *Occupational Health Psychologist*, Kevin Teoh makes some light-hearted observations on the psychosocial working conditions of Santa Claus.

Santa Claus sighs as he reviews his list of kids who have been naughty, and then goes over those who have been marked nice. The increasing global population means the number of children on his list grows with each passing year. Currently, it's estimated to contain the names of between 152 and 526 million children (Bump, 2011; Svan, 2009), meaning a lot of presents to sort out and deliver. This is concerning, as there is ample evidence demonstrating that high workloads are linked with poorer health and lower job satisfaction (Goetz, Musselmann, Szecsenyi & Joos, 2013; Portoghese *et al.*, 2014; Ree *et al.*, 2014). Gosh, a sick and unhappy Santa, we wouldn't want that.

As Christmas approaches and work intensifies, Santa's standard 9-5 hours five days a week gradually extends into the evening and the weekends, increasing the number of hours worked. The seasonal nature of work faced by Santa and his team exists in other industries as well. Accountants during tax filing season go through a similar increase in their working hours, which has a detrimental impact on their health and work-life balance (Greenhaus *et al.*, 1997; Sweeney & Summers, 2002). It's incredible that Santa manages to run such an efficient high performing organization given that a person's cognitive and motor performance is impaired by even one-time exposure to long shifts (Flinn & Armstong, 2011). Putting aside the amazing feat of making deliveries around the world on the 25th of December, more than 24 hours of continuous wakefulness is akin to having a blood alcohol concentration level that is over the legal limit in many countries (Dawson & Reid, 1998). If we are concerned for the safety and wellbeing of Santa, perhaps he shouldn't be operating his sleigh under such conditions.

While the job of Santa is likely to be very secure, I wonder whether his support staff of elves and reindeers experience similar precarious working conditions that many seasonal workers do. Unfortunately, across Europe the high prevalence of temporary contracts faced by such workers not only increases job insecurity, but temporary workers often have fewer employment rights, perform more hazardous jobs, have poorer working conditions and are paid less (Hesselink, Verbiest & Goudswaard, 2015). It is debatable whether the European Working Conditions Survey captures the responses of any of Santa's employees. Surely though, given the charitable nature of Santa he must be as close to the best employer you will find?

We all know that the busy festive season peaks at the end of December, and you could argue that Santa has little influence over this. This isn't desirable considering the importance control in the workplace has in relation to worker happiness and health. However, the reality of many jobs is the presence of external factors beyond a person's control. To manage this, job crafting has emerged with growing support as an approach encouraging workers to alter aspects of their own jobs that they can (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). We actually see Santa himself do this in trying to manage his big deadline. While many countries see the 25th of December as the day Santa Claus visits with presents, Santa has staggered the dates on which he visits different countries. For example, he distributes gifts in the Netherlands on the 5th of December (as *Sinterklaas*),

before moving onto Germany, Switzerland and neighbouring countries the next day. On the 18th, you will find him as St. Nicholas in the Ukraine, while on the 6th of January a *Father Frost* gives out gifts to many children of a Russian Orthodox background.

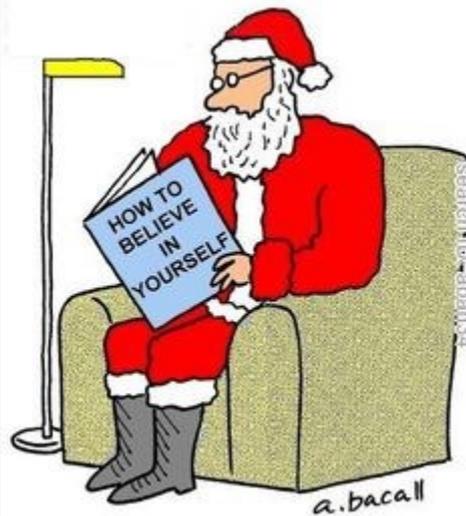
In addition, we see that Santa has crafted part of the job for himself, and delegated aspects of the role to others. Consistently, across Europe and the world we see Santa as the bearer of gifts and happiness. However, in many cultures Santa works in tandem with local representatives who handle issues relating to discipline and punishment. The distributed work often involves beating misbehaving children or taking them away in sacks, and is carried out by Santa's assistant *Krampus* (Austria and Germany), *Schmutzli* (Switzerland) or *Zwarte Pieten* (Belgium and the Netherlands), amongst others. It is not clear why he has crafted his job in this way. It could be to help manage the overwhelming workload, or perhaps because it's an aspect of the job he does not feel comfortable about or even competent at. Regardless, it seems to contribute to Santa's success.

Looking at the nature of Santa Claus' work it is not difficult to be concerned as to what effect emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000) may have on Santa. Encountering millions of children while always having to be jolly and merry can be quite draining. Moreover, Santa has to manage his own emotions and expressions on the job. He is inherently believed to be a jovial person, but there must be times where he experiences emotional dissonance. We've all had bad days at work and this means he has to be friendly and bubbly even when he really does not feel that way. This is a cause for concern as high emotional labour in other industries has been associated with increased burnout, low satisfaction and poor performance (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Mann, 2005). Interestingly, a survey of Australian Santas (Fletcher & Low, 2008) revealed low scores of emotional dissonance, suggesting that the emotions expressed by the Santas in this study were genuine and not fake. So, perhaps Santa's personality mitigates the negative outcomes associated with emotional labour?

Considering these points above, what motivates Santa to work through such difficult working conditions? He is likely to be eligible for retirement, and while he may be doing it for the fame it is unlikely that the role provides a strong financial incentive. It is, however, far more likely that Santa draws meaning and purpose from this job of his. We know that individuals working or volunteering with charity, community and religious organizations are typically motivated by the values they hold as well as having a propensity for prosocial behaviour (Cnaan, Kasternakis & Wineburg, 1993; Yeung, 2004). Furthermore, having a sense of purpose and meaning at work is positively linked with better work and general wellbeing, engagement and performance (Shuck & Rose, 2013; Stegger, Dik & Duffy, 2013). Focusing specifically on Santa, two studies (Fletcher & Low, 2008; Hancock, 2013) involving a group of Santa Clauses found that these actors frequently perceived authenticity in their role as Santa. The job was not only because of the money, but was driven by a sense of recognition that they were doing something worthwhile, bringing happiness to the kids and making it a magical experience for them.

From a distance, it actually seems that Santa has most things under control. Yes - it is not a perfect working environment: there are tight deadlines, heavy workloads, long working hours, emotional labour and seasonal work. Despite this, Santa has taken charge of his work environment, moving deadlines and empowering partners to work with him where possible. Crucially, he appears to be very much in touch with why he is doing this job, providing meaning and purpose to his role. There is still scope to improve,

and I'm sure members of the Academy will be happy to provide a more extensive risk assessment. A better understanding of the demands will help develop and target resources relevant to Santa. Listening to and appreciating Santa is also imperative. After all, if we don't support and believe in Santa, how can we expect Santa to continually believe in himself?



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