85% experience high levels of work stress

The unemployment rate is down and employers have been hiring. But the improving economy doesn't seem to have had much effect on workplace stress, according to a new study by National Public Radio, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Harvard University's Chan School of Public Health.

Researchers found that 85% of employees surveyed said they had experienced high levels of stress at work over the last 12 months and that their employers had made little effort to help.

That was true even though half of the study participants said their employers actually had a wellness program in place.

"The takeaway here is that job No. 1 for U.S. employers is to reduce stress in the workplace," said Robert J. Blendon, professor of health policy and political analysis at the Harvard Chan School, who directed the survey.

Over two-thirds of the surveyed workers reported that they often work overtime or on the weekends, with 20% reporting that they routinely work more than 50 hours per week every week.

Fewer than half of workers who are eligible for paid vacation take all their available leave every year.

Almost half (49%) of employees who work 50 or more hours per week said their workload made it too hard to take a vacation. Of those who do, 52% perform some work during their time off.

What can employers do? Consider requiring employees to take vacation. Use-it-or-lose-it policies may not be enough in workplaces in which supervisors view taking time off negatively. Instead, consider mandating that employees actually take the time off they have earned.

Final note: It may be interesting to revisit the question next year, after the new overtime rules go into effect on Dec. 1, 2016. The new rules likely mean that more workers who are classified as exempt will become eligible for overtime pay—or be told not to work more than 40 hours in a workweek.

Either result could help relieve at least some stress.