

Counting the cost of employee health – Your New Year resolutions

Every senior manager and business owner is aware of the cost of employee health issues and over the last few years in particular, the cost of anxiety and depression; colloquially known in our society as ‘stress’.

Stress is essentially an engineering term. There is a difference between work pressure and stress. Pressure is positive and motivating. When pressure exceeds an individual’s ability to cope they are considered to be under ‘stress’. The dividing line between appropriate workplace pressure and stress is a difficult one.

Employees begin to experience changes in their behaviour, for example some lose their temper, others find it more difficult to make decisions and concentrate. Physical symptoms then occur. Some individuals have a greater ability to cope with psychological pressure than others.

The final phase of the process is when the psychological issues significantly damage an individual’s health. Psychological pressure causes a range of illnesses which include heart problems, musculoskeletal problems, a reduction in immunity and an increase in infections and chronic fatigue.

Psychological illness costs the UK economy approximately 10% of the gross national product every year. ‘Stress’ now accounts for the largest amount of long term sickness absence in the UK, add to this poor workplace moral, long hours and the impact of domestic and personal problems on the workplace, psychological issues, either work or home generated, impacting on the workplace, are the most significant cost to any organisation within the UK.

We now live in an environment where out sourcing, down sizing and long hours are the norm. Job security is at risk. This, linked with increasing requirements to work longer hours, places significant pressures on employees and affects attitudes and behaviour.

You will not be surprised to know that there have been a range of quality of life surveys and research projects to assess the effects of changes within companies.

Such changes may be perceived to increase profitability and productivity in the short term, but in the medium and longer term, they have the effect according to current research, of slowing down the process of decision making within an organisation, and making it increasingly difficult for organisations to achieve the appropriate skill mix and human resource skills for their particular product or services.

Current research indicates that 81% of managers work more than 48 hours a week, 32% work more than 48 hours a week and 10% work more than 60 hours a week. A substantial number of managers frequently work at weekends. This type of working environment impacts on employees own health and the health and welfare of their families. 50% of managers reported that long hours damage their health, 54% said that it adversely affected their relationships with their children and 59% said it damaged their relationships with their partners. Currently, employees at all level report that they consider their jobs are less secure, which places increasing psychological pressure on them and impacts on their job satisfaction.

What can employers do to manage stress in an increasingly changing commercial environment?

There are a significant number of resources; these include the HSE, who have an extremely good website covering the management of stress in the workplace. In addition, other organisations such as MIND, produce useful literature, particularly addressed to managing psychological issues within the workplace and identifying psychological issues at work.

With the advent of the New Year and the impact that psychological illness will have on your organisation in 2007, it would be well worth reviewing your Stress at Work policy and the management processes that are currently in place within your organisation to manage stress within the workplace.

The one thing we can all be certain of in 2007 and onwards, is an increase in the rate of change and flexibility that is required, not only on managers but all employees. Stress is caused by change, lack of control, perceived increasing workload and perceived job insecurity. Individuals in senior management positions have demonstrated by the fact that they have been elevated to such roles, that they can cope with psychological pressure at

work. It is important to remember that if everybody demonstrated the same level of psychological resilience, as an organisation's senior managers, perhaps some of the other employees within the company would have their job!



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Preventative Healthcare staff would like to take this opportunity of wishing you all a very Happy Christmas and a Healthy and successful 2007. If you would like further specific advice with regards to the management of psychological issues within the workplace, please do not hesitate to contact Jane Puncher on j.puncher@phcohealth.co.uk or telephone 01622 775285.

