

Stress in the Workplace



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Introduction

Stress in the workplace has proven to be a prominent issue in organizations as a whole. We chose this topic because we were interested in finding out more about the different points of views regarding job stress and how it affects interpersonal relationships between employees. Our search yielded a lot of articles with a variety of different views on the subject. The most prominent themes that we found addressed the following:

- Wellness programs: what they consist of, how to implement them, and their results
- Stress as a significant problem: statistics, how it affects both employees and organizations as a whole, and tips to alleviate it
- How managers can help: the active role managers need to take, preventive measures they can implement, and tips to help them alleviate employee stress once it has become a significant issue

Wellness Programs

The majority of articles we found advocated the use of wellness programs to combat job stress in an organizational facility. The articles explicated what wellness programs consist of, how to implement them, and what their results typically show.

What Wellness Programs Consist Of

Wellness programs usually consist of a wide variety of facets, but access to fitness centers is usually an integral part, according to the evidence we found. White & Case, a global

law firm, for example, offers an extensive menu from seminars on cancer awareness, heart health and proper nutrition to cholesterol and blood pressure monitoring, from flu immunizations to Yoga and Tai Chi classes and body massages. It also provides discounts to local fitness centers as well as paying Weight Watchers(R) program fees for any staff member who successfully meets her/his targeted weight loss goal (“Innovative Wellness program ideal fit for global law firm White and Case” par.3). Union Pacific Railroad’s wellness program offers a more proactive approach. A key component of the program is a free health risk assessment survey that 34,000 of the company's 47,000 employees have taken voluntarily. Many of the risks involved lifestyle issues, such as smoking, drinking or overeating (U.S. Rail News 128). Fitness is also an integral part of Union’s program. “The program includes contracts with about 500 health clubs and gyms around its system that give free membership to employees.” (U.S. Rail News 128). Thus, according to the articles we found, access to fitness is key.

How to Implement a Wellness Program

The articles examined also typically describe different methods of implementing a wellness program. Margo Vanover Porter’s article offers a step-by-step rubric: “Assess your association's top health risks... Change your association culture, if necessary... Offer an incentive for participation... Provide regular communication... Encourage employees to walk before they run” (Porter 51). An article entitled, “Time to Shift your Focus to Keeping Top Employees,” particularly focuses on the aspect of incentives: “Wellness programs can help control health-care costs and reduce absenteeism from illness...but you need to persuade employees to participate. And to achieve that, you need a program that offers what employees want and comes from a source they trust” (HR Focus 11). Other articles emphasized long-term implications and scopes within the organization that one should consider while planning out

programs. “A wellness program also can address organizational factors within the corporate culture that cause workers stress. As providers point out, failing to tackle this larger problem would allow the program to fail in the long run” (Indiana Business Magazine S6). Program design and appropriate solutions will be influenced by several factors such as the size and complexity of the organization, available resources, and especially the unique types of stress problems faced by the organization (“Prevention” par. 1). Although the methods explained in the articles differed slightly, their listing of approaches and considerations were somewhat similar.

Results of Wellness Programs

The articles on wellness also typically listed positive results of such programs, both for employees and for organizations as a whole. Benefits typically listed were reduced health-care costs, increased morale, higher productivity, and more teamwork (Porter 50). Such benefits have motivated employers to make workforce wellness a top priority (Mayer S4). Another article demonstrated how wellness programs could be used as a retention tool though a survey that said, “56% of the employees polled said the existence of such a program is a ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ important factor in their decision to take a job or remain at their current position” (HR Focus 11). It can thus be ascertained by the articles on wellness that both employees and organizations gain from the programs. Benefits are typically listed after recommended components of wellness programs are explained, and factors involved in planning a program are described.

Stress as a Significant Problem

In the literature that we found, the severity of job stress was demonstrated either through the listing of statistics, the implication of a relationship between job stress and employee

attitudes, or its domino effects on the functions of organizations as a whole. Such articles also included tips as to how to solve the problem.

Significant Statistics

One common element in the pool of articles were statistics regarding the extent of how big a problem job stress has become in recent years. One article states that 67% of workers report “high” stress levels (Safety Compliance Letter 7). Jeweler’s Circular Keytone’s new national survey of scores of retail jewelry business owners and managers finds two in five (44%) say they’re “highly stressed” in their daily work, and almost three in four (70%) experience high stress during holiday sales periods (Shuster 82). Specifically regarding workers’ compensation, David Lee, author of “The True Cost of Employee Stress,” also provides some startling data: “Stress-related claims have skyrocketed. In Maine alone, stress-related claims have increased by 1,000 percent since 1985” (52). Another, article, entitled “Relax, Relate, Release” references how noise levels are related. “A recent Cornell University study found that even low-level noise in open offices can lead to higher levels of stress” (Jackson 61). In this way, the authors of these articles are referencing statistics and studies to prove that stress is indeed a significant problem.

Stress Affects Employees’ Attitudes

Some articles specifically focused on how stress affects employees’ attitudes. “Patient Care Management” is a good example: “As ‘desk rage’ has become more prevalent in the office, employees are being driven to tears, insomnia, and illness because of the rudeness of clients, customers, supervisors, and fellow employees” (par. 4). David Lee takes this further by indicating that added stress can lead to workplace violence. “The roots of violence cannot be traced to a single factor, but stress is clearly a significant contributor--especially where powerlessness and helplessness play central roles in a person’s stress” (53). These articles thus

demonstrate the severity of job stress by indicating how it is directly related to the attitudes of employees.

Stress Affects Organizations

Other articles, however, use the correlation between stress and negative occurrences in organizations to prove the severity of the problem. “Patient Care Management” says, “Job stress and related problems cost American companies an estimated \$200 billion or more annually through absenteeism, turnover, accidents, etc” (par.1). Specifically regarding absenteeism, David Lee further elaborates, “Stressed-out employees miss work both as a coping mechanism and due to health-related problems. Workers experiencing high stress are over two times more likely to be absent more than five times per year” (52). This can lead to decreased productivity, and the article entitled, “Is Job Stress Taking a Toll in your Facility”, explicates the effects of such. It explains, “The American Institute of Stress reports that stress costs businesses in the United States between \$200 and \$300 billion a year in lost productivity, increased workers’ compensation claims, increased turnover, and increased health care costs” (Safety Compliance Letter 7). Thus, the articles in this realm use the correlation between job stress and negative impacts on an organization to indicate the severity of the issue.

Stress Reduction Tips

After demonstrating the severity of the problem, the articles typically offer tips as to how to alleviate workplace stress. A good example of stress reduction tips is explicated by Dr. Cleve Shirey, founder and director of the Meridian Psychiatric Consulting Group in Anchorage: “Workers decide where to best allocate their efforts, realizing that there is only so much of them to go around...Getting enough rest and practicing good self-care can contribute to creating a

happier, healthier worker...Employers also can help workers avoid stress on the job, simply by putting themselves in an employee's place...Employers should ask for anonymous feedback about the physical setup of the office as well as suggestions on how to make their jobs better (Orr 22). Tips function as tools to help the readers of the articles combat stress. Some articles include them, while others do not. They are typically listed after the articles show the severity of stress through statistics, its correlations with employee attitudes, and its connections with organizations.

How Managers Can Help

Some articles, rather than promote the use of wellness programs as a solution, suggest ways that managers can proactively reduce the amount of stress that their employees face. The literature on this subject advocates that managers should take an active role in helping their employees alleviate stress, lists preventive measures they can take, and provides tips to help them reduce stress in the workplace as a whole. There were not as many of these articles as there were regarding wellness programs.

Managers Should Take an Active Role

According to Marcia Pennington Shannon, a principal in the Washington, DC, attorney management consulting firm Shannon & Manch, “If you suspect that your firm is under the influence of high doses of stress, it is important for you, as a firm leader, to proactively seek out ways to reduce stress—and gain the support of others in doing so—as quickly as possible” (54). This point of view demonstrates a common thread in the literature regarding how managers can combat employee stress. Such articles encourage managers to take an active role. Some suggest

that managers do this by first looking for warning signs. Some warning signs include a lack of participation by workers in decision-making; an isolating work environment that discourages communication between workers; having too much responsibility, or too many "hats" to wear; ongoing job insecurity with little perceived chance of promotion; and working in an unpleasant, noisy or crowded environment (Orr 22). Other articles provide action plans that managers can take once warning signs have been established. Shannon suggests, "Assess the stress level in your work environment...Determine whether your own supervisory style or that of other supervisors contributes to the high stress level...Make it a rule that your office be a supportive environment...Talk with each person you supervise about his or her position" (54).

Preventive Measures Managers Can Take

While all articles on managers and stress management suggest managers should take an active role, some specifically list preventative measures they can take. NIOSH encourages managers to build general awareness about job stress (causes, costs and control)...Secure top management commitment and support...incorporate employee input and involvement ("Prevention" par.2). Dr. Cleve Shirey also suggests changing the work environment to promote employee morale and prevent stress level increase. "Sometimes it's something as basic as the way the workplace is set up. Are they dealing with poor lighting or equipment that doesn't work well? Do their workstations cause them pain? Do they not have enough assistance to do the things that they need to do?" (Orr 22). Hence, these articles aim to help managers assess their workplaces in a manner in which they can prevent stress from reaching a debilitating level.

Tips to Help Managers Reduce Employee Stress

Other articles specify how managers can reduce stress once it has become a significant problem for their employees. An article entitled, “Tips Designed to Protect against Stress,” is a good example. It states, “Talk to employees regularly to ensure that everyone is clear about what their job requires them to do. Staff should be supported and encouraged. A team working environment should be fostered and procedures put in place to look after work loads left by absent employees. Listen to stress complaints. If stress is work-related then try to address the source. Undertake stress risk assessments.” (The Safety & Health Practitioner 62). Shannon adds to this by stating, “Make it a rule that your office be a supportive environment. Talk with each person you supervise about his or her position. Do your people have the responsibility level and decision-making appropriate for their abilities and experience? (Shannon 54). These articles thus provide helpful hints to managers who operate in organizations where stress is already a problem and preventive measures are moot.

Conclusion

In the literature reviewed the discussion of wellness programs and their benefits dominated the pages. Stress is a huge problem in the United States and around the world. A manager may choose to operate solo and try to identify stress with the many tips and hints given to help employees alleviate stress. However, it seems that a well-rounded wellness program is the option that is perceived to be the best solution to workplace stress. Both employees and employers have an opportunity to gain from a well-designed wellness program.

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