

TRENDLINES

The Employers' Association's monthly whitepaper on essential Business/Human Resources practices

The Employers' Association (TEA) delivers reports for businesses that contain relevant and up-to-date information based on our work with hundreds of employers each month. TEA is known to produce a number of essential benchmark survey reports every year and we also compile data and observations that provide organizations practical perspectives on important business trends.

Managing Stress in the Workplace during COVID-19 and Beyond

What you should know

The coronavirus pandemic has put a spotlight on workplace stress like never before, with a host of startling statistics revealing the effects of the crisis. The strain on all employees has been – and will continue to be – an intense and unprecedented strain because of social distancing, the potential of exposure to illness and loss, financial pressures, and rapidly changing priorities like this have never been experienced. According to research conducted by the American Psychological Association, job stress is estimated to cost U.S. industry \$300 billion a year through absenteeism, diminished productivity, employee turnover and direct medical, legal and insurance fees. Health professionals have long recognized that the mental health of employees is a crucial determinant in their overall health and that stressors at the workplace can be a contributing factor to a range of physical illnesses. In addition, stress can also lead to employee burn-out, seriously affecting their ability to contribute meaningfully in both their personal and professional lives. Even prior to the virus, a survey taken by *Mental Health America's Workplace Health Survey* found that 63% of respondents said workplace stress significantly impacted their mental and behavioral health, with over one in three reporting that they engaged in unhealthy behaviors in response to that stress.

The general duties of employers to take reasonable care for the health, safety and well-being of their workers will only be made more crucial due to the current pandemic. This report will help organizations to more fully understand the challenges presented by COVID-19 and to provide recommendations on actions which will mitigate the negative affect of workplace stressors and to help create a culture that values and provides support to the mental health needs of employees.

What we know

The impact that stress is having on the nation's workforce was recently reported in a *Human Resources Executive* article. Nearly 7 in 10 employees indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has been the most stressful time of their entire professional career and that 88% of workers have experienced moderate to extreme stress since the onset of the virus. Many studies have shown a direct correlation between stress and the development of anxiety disorders and that chronic stress increases the risk of developing additional health problems including obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, hypertension, and a weakened immune system. Research conducted by the American Psychiatric Association found that excessive workplace stress causes a staggering 120,000 deaths and results in nearly \$190 billion in health care costs each year. This represents 5 to 8% of national health care spending, derived primarily from high demands at work (\$48 billion), lack of insurance (\$40 billion), and work-family conflict (\$24 billion).

Starting with the onset of COVID-19 earlier this year, The Employers' Association (TEA) has heard from many member companies that increased levels of employee stress at work and at home are causing serious detrimental effects on their businesses. Individuals who participate in TEA's HR and Safety Round Tables and those calling for assistance on our HR Helpline continue to express how workplace stressors are causing, sky-high absenteeism, burnout, lower productivity, reduced morale, and more disengaged employees. The Association has also found that more employers are initiating employee engagement surveys to provide stressed employees a voice, build their trust, and help the organization make more informed decisions during these tumultuous times.

A common definition of work-related stress is "The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work." There is a difference between pressure and stress. Some forms of pressure may be a positive if perceived as acceptable by an individual, and may even keep workers alert, motivated, and able to work and learn depending on the available resources and their personal characteristics. Workplace stress is the harmful physical and emotional responses that can happen when there is a conflict between job demands on the employee and the amount of control an employee has over meeting these demands. In general, the combination of high demands in a job and a low amount of control over a situation can lead to stress. Mental health experts have identified several factors as being significant initiators of employee stress:

- Adjusting to and managing different workloads, roles, and responsibilities
- Adapting to a different workspace or a new work schedule
- Adjusting to new communication methods and tools (e.g., technology, virtual meetings) and/or new workplace policies and procedures
- Balancing work responsibilities with familial or caregiving roles (e.g., difficulties securing childcare, educating children at home)
- Financial concerns due to reduced hours, extended time away from work, or unemployment
- Concerns about securing the appropriate technology and tools to effectively perform work tasks
- Financial concerns due to workplace closures, job losses, or extended time away
- Concerns about the future of the workplace and/or job security
- Fear or worry about experiencing stigma or discrimination after successfully completing self-isolation and returning to the workplace
- Familial stress or tension while staying home with family members for extended periods of time
- Social isolation, loneliness, or boredom while away from work

All of the above factors can be linked to the pandemic, yet there are significant events that occurred prior to COVID-19 which were causing workers additional stress. These include fear of mass shootings, acts of terrorism, political upheaval, the upcoming presidential election, natural disasters, the perceived unfair treatment of minorities by the police, protests, and rioting in the streets. After considering the many causes of stress, it is crucial to understand the *effects* that stress has on the employees themselves. The American Institute of Stress lists several common stress-related symptoms that have an impact on the workplace:

- Excess anxiety, worry, and nervousness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Trouble learning
- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty making decision
- Reduced work efficiency and productivity
- Problems communicating
- Constant fatigue

What it means

The American Institute of Stress estimates that job stress costs U.S. industry more than \$300 billion a year in absenteeism, turnover, diminished productivity, and medical, legal and insurance costs. Because of the increasing numbers of employees who are feeling stressed both at work and at home due to the effects of COVID-19, there will certainly be even greater repercussions on the bottom line for employers. We can either ignore the issue and hope it goes away OR we can address it with practical understanding, recognizing that workplace stress impacts all people differently so there is no “one size fits all” solution. Life changes drastically during times of fear, when people feel they have lost control of their situations and when humans that need contact with others are isolated. Unfortunately, the “norm” has become the exception as people must deal with blended school schedules, restricted vacations, news media highlighting the negative, business closures, altered sports and entertainment options and a myriad of other lifestyle modifications that have been imposed upon them rather than being chosen by them. The more life changes, the more people lose their way, causing those who have lost their livelihood to feel abandoned and those that still have their jobs to feel insecure, distracted and concerned (often about things they cannot control but that still impact their lives) causing stress that can potentially threaten their health, their relationships and their ability to focus at home OR at work. Distracted employees are less efficient, potentially less diligent about safety, often more negative in their interactions with others, and inevitably more focused on their “here and now” than on the organization’s long-term objectives. These distractions cannot be totally eliminated but in order to continue to provide a quality product or service in a safe and efficient manner while supporting their most valuable resource, employers must take intentional actions to minimize the impact that stress can place upon people.

What you can do

Employers can help to offset stress-related behaviors and reduce their impact both at home and in the workplace (because the two environments really cannot be totally separated) by focusing on the following factors:

- **Clarify your organization’s leadership structure**

Employees NEED to know what is happening “in their world” and what to expect and strong, consistent leadership breeds their confidence in what will be happening in the future. Lead by example in every aspect of the business, including recognizing and controlling the leader’s own stress. Regularly communicate to all employees about job performance, job responsibilities, company health, and reiterate the company vision. People follow leaders willingly if they are confident that the leader knows where they are going and has a plan how to get there.

- **Develop organization-wide stress reduction policies and practices**

Train leaders and supervisors on effective ways to reduce stress. These ways could include:

- Work with employees to create challenging but realistic goals.
- Provide fair and equitable compensation policies.
- Formally recognize individual and team achievements.
- Create a work environment that encourages social support and connectedness.

- **Offer stress intervention options**

Encourage employees to take advantage of stress screenings and early warning signs of stress then offer intervention programs like cognitive-behavioral therapy for stress management and programs that effectively lessen stress (mindfulness, relaxation, yoga and tai chi) ALONG WITH access to individuals experienced and knowledgeable in finding the “root cause” of stress rather than focusing on the results of it being acted out.

- **Offer an employee assistance program (EAP)**

An EAP generally includes short-term counseling and referral services for employees and their household members. EAPs are intended to help employees deal with personal problems that might adversely impact their work performance, health and well-being.

- **Institute an open-door policy**

Inviting employees to have a say about their work environment in an honest and open fashion can change the workplace culture and reduce stress. Improve communications by allowing employees the opportunity to participate in decisions and actions affecting their jobs, while also providing an opportunity for social interaction and collaboration among staff members.

- **Provide flexible work arrangements**

Allow employees to work remotely when possible and provide flexible work schedules if the work allows it supports better work/life balance and has been proven to result in greater employee productivity and performance, improved morale, stronger engagement, and better job retention.

- **Encourage breaks**

Employers should encourage short breaks so employees can deal with issues before they become major situations that will negatively impact both health and performance. Breaks can rejuvenate the body and brain, resulting in higher quality of work. Encouraging short breaks will also make employees know that their supervisor cares about their health and safety by allowing them to quickly deal with personal concerns they may be carrying with them to work rather than allowing them to distract and disturb them throughout the day.

- **Establish Wellness programs**

Wellness programs are designed to improve employee health, reduce health care expenses, enhance productivity, decrease stress and boost morale. Effective wellness programs come in all shapes and sizes and can include smoking cessation programs, flu shots, health screenings, fitness incentives, nutrition counseling and even simple initiatives like adding fresh fruits and vegetables in the break room.

- **Focus on results more than process**

Now more than ever we must focus on the outcomes we need rather than the way that those results are reached. Encourage creativity. Actively seek the input of those engaged in the process. Ask questions and listen to the answers. Give credit for progress – for innovation – for people that make a difference by stepping out of the “tell me what to do” norm and venturing into the “what about this?” future. We should never change our expectations BUT now may be a great time to be more open-minded about HOW the results can be delivered.

Stress in the workplace is not a new phenomenon but it has been heightened during these times of uncertainty. Encourage employees to deal with what they can and seek assistance to help them with those things that are out of their control – and to have courage and ability to recognize the difference so that they can begin reducing their fears and gaining the confidence to move forward. Listen...hear...support...encourage action...monitor results...redirect efforts...repeat. Give more time and show more caring than you might feel necessary and you will be surprised at how much more everyone involved will be able to give in return because of your support.