Job Stress: The Effect On Employees And Employers Essay, Research Paper

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The Effect on Employees and Employers

Job stress poses a significant threat to employee health and consequently to the health of an organization. This report will provide information on the causes of stress, the resulting symptoms, the consequences to employers, and the programs employers can implement to reduce the adverse effects of stress in the workplace.

It is important for both employees and employers to recognize and understand stress and its causes. Often times employers confuse job challenges and job stressors. Most employees view a job challenge as a motivating factor, which enables them to grow within their positions. This motivation has the potential to produce positive results for both employees and employers. However, when challenges become demands, employees often resort to the fight or flight response of our primal ancestors. At the sight of a dangerous encounter, the hypothalamus sends a message to the adrenal glands and within seconds the heart is pumping at two or three times the normal speed, sending blood to the major muscle groups with soaring blood pressure. In most cases, the employee does not have the opportunity to fight or flee, and as a result the increased energy is internalized and over time manifests itself as stress. Stress is not an illness, however prolonged exposure to stressful conditions can increase the risk of injury or disease. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (??NIOSH??), job stress can be defined as “the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the employee”. For instance, management style, interpersonal relationships, work roles, career concerns, work-life issues, sociocultural atmosphere, and environmental conditions may all be considered stressors.

The following illustrations represent extreme cases, but a common thread between all of the examples is lack of communication, lack of resources, and lack of control. Typically, people are affected by an assortment of these stressors and at a variety of levels.

Management Style

Many employees suffer from stress caused by managers who expect results without establishing clear goals. An example would be an office head that is responsible for increasing profitability and decreasing overhead, without receiving a budget from the home office. At the end of the year, the office head’s performance cannot be considered objectively. Consequently, his or her incentive compensation becomes subjective.

Interpersonal Relationships In many organizations, workers have little decision-making power. For example, a customer service representative is responsible for fielding incoming calls. Inevitably, the calls are primarily from angry customers concerned about a late shipment. The representative has no control over the shipping department and in fact has virtually no communication with that department. After listening to the customer’s complaints over a period of time, the representative has several suggestions which management could implement in the shipping department that may improve customer satisfaction. Unfortunately, management is not interested in the ideas of a customer service representative. And as a result, the representative is attacked daily by angry customers whose concerns could have been prevented.

Work Roles Some employees suffer from stress caused by excess responsibility and a shortage of time. An example of which might be a salesperson who has a broad scope of responsibilities with little support and a full travel schedule. In many instances, the salesperson is unable to meet unrealistic reporting deadlines because of excessive travel.

Career Concerns Other employees may stress about an impending reorganization and its potential consequences. For example, management hires a consulting firm to evaluate departmental effectiveness and profitability. The employees may feel that management views their work as substandard and is formulating a reduction in forces plan which could ultimately affect their jobs.

Work-Life Issues Often workplace stress is caused by balancing personal and professional responsibilities. For example, a nurse who also has to care for an aging, dependant parent.

Sociocultural Atmosphere Some employees are subjected to an atmosphere of gender bias and/or sexual harassment. For example, a woman works as a real estate broker, which is a male-dominated field. She is constantly subjected to sexual innuendo. She is even made to look incompetent in client meetings by her male counterparts who ask ridiculous and irrelevant questions.

Environmental Conditions Employees are required to perform in adverse working conditions which often cause signs of stress. For instance, a mill worker is subjected to the constant humming of machines.

Repeated exposure to stressful situations such as those mentioned above often cause symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbances, irritability, and boredom. Other warning signs may include upset stomach, job dissatisfaction, muscle tension, and low morale. Studies have shown that stress in the workplace has been linked to some of the leading causes of death, including heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, workplace accidents, cirrhosis, and suicide. According to the Encyclopedia of Occupational Safety and Health, studies suggest that psychologically demanding jobs which allow employees little control over work process increase the risk of cardiovascular disease. It is also widely believed that job stress produces an increased risk of back and upper extremity musculoskeletal disorders. Furthermore, several studies suggest that a variety of mental health problems, from burnout to depression, have been linked to job stress. Although more studies are needed, it has become a mounting concern that on-the-job injuries are on the rise due to job related stress.

According to the Journal of Occupations and Environmental Medicine, healthcare expenditures are nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress. Furthermore, the American Institute of Stress estimates that more than 75% of all doctor visits are for stress-related complaints or disorders. People also spent nearly $11 billion last year on stress management programs, products and services.

Although stress poses a variety of health concerns to individuals, organizations also suffer its consequences. According to the National Safety Council, it is estimated that one million workers are absent on an average workday because of stress related complaints. Furthermore, to the American Institute of Stress reports that 40 percent of employee turnover is related to job tension. A study published in the Journal of Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice, found that when workers are under stress, they tend to lose their group perspective and focus on their own personal goals to the detriment of their colleagues. In a study of 100 naval personnel, each three-member group was subjected to a decision-making task simulation under varying stressful conditions. As expected, those operating under the highest level of stress performed worse than those operating under normal circumstances. Furthermore, the study indicated that the higher the stress level, the subject acted from a more individual perspective, which ultimately deteriorated team performance. In addition, the 1995 Workers Compensation Yearbook reports:

In 1960, a Michigan court upheld a compensation claim by an automotive assembly-line worker who had difficulty keeping up with the pressures of the production line. To avoid falling behind, he tried to work on several assemblies at the same time and often got parts mixed up. As a result, he was subjected to repeated criticism from the foreman. Eventually, he suffered psychological breakdown.

By 1995, nearly one-half of the States allowed worker compensation claims for emotional disorders and disability due to stress on the job [note, however, that courts are reluctant to uphold claims for what can be considered ordinary working conditions or just hard work] (NIOSH).

Given that job stress is estimated to cost U. S. industry $300 billion annually as assessed by absenteeism, diminished productivity, employee turnover, and consequently legal fees and insurance premiums, it is important for employers to implement programs that promote a low stress atmosphere in the workplace. The American Psychologists Association recommends the following organizational changes to help prevent job stress:

?Y Ensure that the workload is in line with the worker’s capabilities and resources.

?Y Design jobs to provide meaning, stimulation, and opportunities for workers to use their skills.

?Y Clearly define workers’ roles and responsibilities.

?Y Give worker’s opportunities to participate in decisions and actions affecting their jobs.

?Y Improve communications ?V reduce uncertainty about career development and future employment prospect.

?Y Provide opportunities for social interaction among workers.

?Y Establish work schedules that are compatible with demands and responsibilities outside the job.

Other elements of a healthy company include open communication, employee involvement, health-enhancing work environments, community responsibility, and institutional fairness. Many companies have taken a variety steps to promote this type of atmosphere. For example, Harley-Davidson, the Milwaukee-based motorcycle manufacturer, implemented the use of work groups in its Capital Drive plant in 1995. Since then, there has been a “steady decline in worker’s compensation claims” which resulted in higher profits for the company. According to John Gillard, president of PACE Local 7-0209, workers feel they have more control over their jobs because they have a voice in day-to-day operations. Honeywell offers employee assistance counselors and stress management classes. The Leo Burnett advertising agency in Chicago, has a on-site massage therapist once a week, while National Semiconductor of Santa Clara, California provides an on-site fitness center that offers yoga and karate among other things.

While some companies suffer the consequences of stress in the workplace, others like Massachusetts based WFD, Inc. (”WFD”), profit from it. WFD offers innovative services that assist employers in facilitating the needs of their employees thereby producing measurable business results such as customer loyalty and satisfaction, revenues and profits and shareholder value. WFD’s services include employee commitment audits, work-life strategy consulting, community investment and dependent care strategy consulting, and workplace flexibility consulting.

The bottom line is that job-related stress is costing both employees and employers a tremendous amount of money, not to mention health.