Workplace Stress = Safety Issues

Recently, stress in the workplace has acquired national attention due to the propensity for stressed workers to be involved in accidents, injuries, and job failures. Job stress is 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 worker. Such stress can lead to poor health, injury, and lost work time—all factors of workers comp costs.

It is estimated that American businesses lose $200-300 billion per year to stress-related productivity loss. Lack of sleep is one of the largest factors that can result from high job stress, as surveys show a relationship between lack of sleep and poor work performance. A 2004 Circadian Technologies study showed that employees who work extended hours, such as shift workers, were found to only sleep about five hours per night, suffered back and wrist pain, regardless of the nature of their jobs, and that this lack of sleep equated to longer recovery time. The workers compensation implications are clear—stressed workers are more likely to have injuries and therefore miss work, resulting in higher workers compensation costs for employers.

Some early warning signs of job stress could be: headache, sleep disturbances (as referenced above); difficulty concentrating, short temper, upset stomach, and low morale. High levels of stress can lead to cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, psychological disorders, and workplace injury. A stressed worker is more likely to cut safety corners and engage in dangerous activities as a result of their desire to quickly accomplish tasks when their workload is overwhelming. This can lead to severe injuries that the employer will ultimately pay for in workers compensation premiums.

Although it is not possible to completely eliminate stress in the workplace, certain actions can be taken by employers to minimize stress:

- Ensure that the workload is in line with the workers’ capabilities and resources. Design jobs to provide meaning, stimulation, and opportunities. Clearly define workers’ roles and responsibilities. Improve communication by reducing uncertainty about career development and future prospects. Provide opportunities for social interaction.
- Establish work schedules that are compatible with demands and responsibilities outside the job.

Employees can help minimize their stress levels by laughing and socializing with coworkers, taking several deep breaths, stretching, and by taking ten minutes at the beginning of each day to prioritize and organize their day.

Employers can gain bottom-line benefits by implementing stress-reduction tactics within their organizations. These benefits could range from improved productivity and performance, decreased healthcare costs, improved recruitment and retention, and better attendance.

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