

Reducing Workplace Stress

Untreated employee stress can lead to serious outcomes for both staff and employers.

By Gerry Kaplan

Workplace stress is unavoidable. In fact, a certain amount of stress at work is essential to ensure that employees feel positively challenged, and that they continue to develop new skills and abilities. However, for some employees the stress they experience can become overwhelming, leading to frustration, disillusionment, and even anger. The American Institute of Stress estimates that negative workplace stress costs U.S. companies alone \$150 million in losses annually. In addition, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health estimates that about 40 per cent of all employees experience moderate or "extreme" levels of stress.

Moderate or high levels of workplace stress are often associated with:

- increased absenteeism;
- increased conflict in the workplace;
- reduced productivity;
- poor customer service;
- reduced quality of work;
- difficulty concentrating;
- more workplace injuries.

Workplace stress has also been linked to high blood pressure, heart and stomach problems, sleep disorders, depression, anxiety, and even problems in employees' relationships outside of work. If these conditions go unrecognized and untreated they can lead to much more serious outcomes for both employees and their companies.

While the common factors that can cause workplace stress vary, they generally include:

- not feeling valued at work;
- not feeling meaningfully involved in decision-making and problem-solving;
- having insufficient information to do their jobs well;
- having insufficient training or professional development;
- a lack of a work and life balance;
- workload issues – too much work

and not enough time;

- the physical demands of the job;
- workplace politics, including a lack of trust at work, gossip, and perceived favouritism;
- poor relationships with their co-workers and immediate supervisors.

The existence of negative workplace stress may not always be obvious. In workplaces with separate departments or work locations, the specific causes and levels of stress can vary widely across employee groups. Employees

The good news is that negative workplace stress can be reduced significantly, through the outcomes of strategic planning processes based on formal research findings.

who experience the highest levels of stress report, on average, from nine to 14 different stress factors. This means that no one solution alone is going to successfully reduce the levels of workplace stress experienced by these employees.

The good news is that negative workplace stress can be reduced significantly, through the outcomes of strategic planning processes based on formal research findings. Below are some steps that will help ensure that your company gets the best value given the time and commitment of the managers and employees who complete a questionnaire, or participate in a focus group or interview.

- 1) Ensure that your employee questionnaire or other research questions are specifically designed

for your sector or industry. Avoid generic or 'canned' questionnaires often available online.

2) Endeavour to include all managers and employees in your study. This can also include term employees and those who are on leaves of absence.

3) Ensure that analysis is undertaken not just in the aggregate (i.e., all employees as a single group) but by factors such as employees' positions, occupations, work locations, education and training, years of experiences, and even their gender and ages.

4) Ensure that you have the data needed to help you to develop effective stress-reduction strategies. Don't limit your process to a single question, such as 'Do you experience workplace stress?' Drill down with questions such as:

- how much negative workplace stress do you experience?
- what factors cause you stress at work?
- what is the impact of workplace stress on your life outside of work, and vice versa?
- what strategies do you personally use to resolve your own stress?
- how effective are these strategies?
- what changes should the company make to help reduce levels of negative workplace stress?

5) Ensure that you receive a report that includes a full analysis and interpretation of all of your study findings. Also ensure that the report includes a clear and manageable set of recommendations designed to help you to develop, implement and assess your strategic plan. M



Gerry Kaplan MSW, is president of Kaplan Research Associates Inc. He can be reached at 204-957-5694 or at gskaplan@mts.net