

UNDER PRESSURE



Photo by Michele Piacquadio/Photos.com

A NEW NATIONAL STANDARD MAKES EMPLOYERS MORE RESPONSIBLE FOR MANAGING WORKPLACE STRESS

By Sarah B. Hood

The economic meltdown, the tech revolution, the overwhelmed caregiver, the nightly news: the topic of every elevator conversation, it seems, is related to our spiralling stress levels. How should HR respond?

“Stress is part of life,” said Antoinette Blunt, CHRP, SHRP, FCHRP, president of Ironside Consulting Services Inc. in Sault Ste. Marie. “The issue is how much is reasonable, how do we manage it and when does stress become unmanageable?”

Indeed, stress can be positive before it becomes overwhelming.

“There is good stress; there is a level of stress that’s a motivator, that helps push you forward with deadlines,” explained Andrea Binnington, CHRP, based in Milton, Ont. “Different people are stressed by totally different things; what stresses one person out would be totally manageable for other people.”

Jennifer Lee is the project manager for Work With Us, a workplace-based support program for Canadians living with depression or arthritis run jointly by The Arthritis Society and Mood Disorders Society of Canada. Her program defines stress as “the emotional and physical strain caused by our response to pressure from the outside world.” The 2013 Statistics Canada Health Profile reports that “23.4 per cent of Canadians have perceived stress in their lives”; according to the Canadian Community Health Survey, “most days in their life were quite a bit or extremely stressful.”

In 2011, the Sun Life Wellness Institute’s Buffett National Wellness Survey reported that 56 per cent of senior HR respondents considered stress to be the top risk to workforce health.

“Stress is top ranked for good reason,” said Dr. Richard Earle, managing direc-

tor of the Canadian Institute of Stress. “Higher stress levels elevate absence costs by up to 19 per cent, all disability costs by up to 30 per cent and turnover costs by up to 40 per cent. Also, according to Towers-Watson, stress-based mental health issues are the drivers behind 85 per cent of long-term disability claims.”

Stress, according to Earle, “is the mechanism whereby we rev up the energy to deal with problems or opportunities; it’s the main thing that companies pay for.” He defines problematic stress in terms of return on investment (ROI). “What are you getting back from what you’re putting in? That’s the core question that HR needs to address,” he said.

When people feel great satisfaction and reward for their efforts, they don’t suffer from stress; when they feel overused, unappreciated and undercompensated, they do.

“You have to work foot-to-the-floor for about two years before you see the signs of burnout,” Earle said. This happens when the body is over-stimulated with “upper” hormones like adrenalin for so long that it eventually tries to exert balance by flooding the system with the depressing hormone cortisol.

CONSEQUENCES OF STRESS

Stress causes numerous health problems, says Lee.

“Poor concentration, low productivity, feeling unfulfilled, feeling very tired and not being able to step out of a work mindset at home [are symptoms of ongoing stress],” she said. “It has been shown that long-term chronic stress is associated with depression and difficulties with sleeping.”

Furthermore, Binnington noted, “You’re looking at impacts to the compa-

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ny, [like] having people off on sick leave. The stress can cause discord within the climate of the company; potentially, your overall morale starts to drop.”

Stressed workers can have a big impact on an organization, overall.

“Turnover of key talent goes up and the reputation of the company goes down,” said Earle. “People are less creative in problem-solving; they’re less committed.”

It’s a fine line to walk for employers, who need to find a proper balance for their workers.

“We need a certain amount of stimulation, interest and agitation to keep us on the ball and engaged,” said Dr. Martin Shain, principal with The Neighbour at Work Centre. “But it’s very important for supervisors to know when they’re pushing too hard.” While some cases of unhealthy stress originate outside the workplace, he continued, “We can estimate that somewhere between one-quarter and one-third [are due to] workplace events – people behaving towards one another in a way that causes what is increasingly called ‘mental injury.’”



A NEW STANDARD

Shain is a member of the Technical Committee that advised the Canadian Standards Association on the creation of a new Canadian Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace, introduced in January 2013.

“[The Standard] emerges from the rec-

ognition that mental harm in the workplace is a largely unmanaged risk that we can and should be doing something about, and it’s based on a lot of scientific and legal evidence that says this is harmful and also preventable,” he said.

The Standard will oblige employers to take more responsibility for protecting the mental health of their employees in much

the same way that they are expected to prevent risks to physical health and safety. It calls for “a systematic approach in assessing and addressing risks to mental health that arise from the ways that people are organized and managed,” said Shain, and HR professionals “need to be instrumental in creating policies that are consistent with [it].”

An organization that performs according to the Standard will, as it states, “maintain procedures to monitor, measure and record” conditions affecting psychological health and safety, take “preventive and corrective action procedures to address risks” and engage in “management review and continual improvement.”

SIGNS TO WATCH FOR

The signs of stress manifest themselves in many ways.

“Mood Disorders Society of Canada has identified some physical signs and symptoms, such as muscle tension, stomach and digestive problems and restless sleeps,” said Lee. “Some emotional signs include depression, irritability and mood swings, and social indicators can include things like intolerance of others or social withdrawal.”

The effects depend on the individual, according to Shain. Different people exhibit different symptoms of suffering from stress.

“It can be unusual behaviour: uncharacteristic aggression, sudden withdrawal, appearance of depression,” he explained. “It can take the form of agitation, interpersonal conflict or not recognizing where other people are coming from.”

There are also specific work-related cues to be on the lookout for.

“I would look for missed deadlines or unacceptable reports,” said Earle, in terms of employee performance. “Turnover, internal and external client dissatisfaction, the drug benefit plan – [specifically,] antidepressants on the uptick. Employment standards, human rights and harassment complaints, absences on Monday – they suggest drugs or alcohol.”

And workplaces can do more to make sure their employees are not dealing with overbearing amounts of stress on a consistent basis.

“As we have said in our Mental Health

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in the Workplace Series, 'workplace stress is the harmful physical and emotional response that occurs when there is a poor match between job demands and the capabilities, resources or needs of the worker,'" said Lee. "Through Work With Us, we focus on providing the tools people need to practice self-management techniques that can be beneficial."

The Canadian Institute of Stress uses online profiles to measure stress. DNA HR Assessment in Montreal also provides a variety of useful tools, such as the Interqualia assessment that shows level of challenge versus level of skill.

"It's based on 18 non-technical skills. Quickly you can see why someone is anxious or bored, and it will recommend a plan of action for what you should do," said DNA senior consultant, Denis Arseneau, B.Sc., CHRM, CTOX, CHRP. "This one is unique; it can be good to prevent burnout, but it's also good to assess someone who wants to go back to work."

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"This speaks to the necessity of more negotiation within work groups," said Shain. When new and greater burdens are imposed, "the fact is that teams that [discuss together how to cope with the increased workload] seem to weather the storm better than teams that don't. Teams that have a maintenance program in place to deal with extra and often unexpected work demands typically do better."


Organizational transparency also goes a long way to managing stress in employees, according to Blunt.

"From a broader perspective, what can help to maintain the balance of stress is keeping your employees informed of major changes like mergers, sales and department realignments. If people find out first from you, regardless of whether they have an ability to affect the change, they will have the ability to cope with it," she said.

"The other issue is understanding what the benefits are in your company – are you open to providing a personal leave of ab-

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Great-West Life's Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace identifies four key areas where HR managers can reduce stress and increase satisfaction: by reducing, clarifying and legitimizing demands; by increasing worker's control over their jobs; by reducing effort and strain; and by increasing rewards – which need not be monetary.



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“WORKPLACE STRESS IS THE HARMFUL PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL RESPONSE THAT OCCURS WHEN THERE IS A POOR MATCH BETWEEN JOB DEMANDS AND THE CAPABILITIES, RESOURCES OR NEEDS OF THE WORKER.”

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sence, regardless of what the situation is? People really need to look at their employee assistance programs (EAPs), and to expand that further as far as looking at coping and health and wellness programs, or devoting a certain number of dollars that can be accessed for a fitness club membership or yoga classes.”

Ultimately, in Earle’s opinion, “There are only three ways to deal with a low-ROI situation. Number one, leave it. Number two is to change it. Small fine-tunings, not from HR or top managers, but from the workers themselves, can adjust the ROI. There’s so much you can do with a feedback loop from the people who actually know the job. In most companies, hardly any roll-up happens from the people who know the job.”

He offers the example of one of his client companies, where he asked a group of customer service representatives for ways to increase their work satisfaction, and in particular to address the common problem of lower back pain. The company implemented a suggestion from the team: replacing their eight-foot telephone cords with 15-foot cords. “Six months later, their disability days for lower back pain were down by 52 per cent.”

The third approach is to learn how to live with the status quo.

Among the various resources available through the Canadian Institute of Stress is instruction in raising personal satisfaction levels.

MAKING CHANGES

“It’s necessary to look for some win-win solutions that the people who write the cheques can get behind,” said Earle. “You’ve got to demonstrate that it’s a saving for the company.”

In the climate of the new Canadian Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace, making the case for investing in stress reduction has never been more pressing.

“One of the things that HR professionals need to appreciate is the legal climate in which the Standard emerged. Employers are really in the crosshairs of about seven different branches of law where they can be hit with liability for mental injury. HR folks have a responsibility to be aware of this themselves and also to be talking it up to senior management,” said Shain.

“People come into the workplace with problems, but what we’re interested in is what the workplace does to detract from mental health,” he continued. “This is basically a whole new horizon of risk.” ■

