Brown Bagger

This section is set up to provide a ready-made Brown Bag Session for you to use with employees and/or managers. Use as is, or adapt this information for a general employee group. You may reproduce as many copies as needed.

Employee Stress an Issue for Nearly All Employers

Employers are making stress management their top priority over the next two years, with almost all (98%) believing that stress was an issue for their workforce, research from Towers Watson reveals.

The consultant's latest *Health, Wellbeing and Productivity* survey also showed that, of those employers able to measure well-being, an overwhelming 86% thought that excessive workload and/or long hours were the most significant causes of stress. Nearly all employers (97%) also thought that work-life balance was an issue.

Currently over 40% of employers have a stress management program in place according to the study, while an additional 31% plan to introduce them in the next two years.

Towers Watson senior consultant Rebekah Haymes said: "The current focus for many employers is largely on help at the point of need; however, in the future, they do foresee emphasizing prevention, particularly with regard to managing stress levels.

"Stress can have a major negative impact on the productivity of employees," Haymes added. "That employers are now starting to focus on prevention and encouraging healthier lifestyles is a step in the right direction."

Mental Health

The mental health of workers was ranked as the second highest priority for employers (62%), with raising employee engagement being at the top of the list.

Too Much Access

The role of technology in facilitating access to work outside normal office hours was named as the second-highest cause of stress by three-quarters of employers (76%).

"The trend towards technologies that enable more flexible working have beneficial effects on productivity but they also have potential adverse effects on workers as the expectation of responding 'out of office hours' rises," Haymes continued. "The combination of working long hours and feeling the need to remain on call outside working hours weighs heavily on some employees' shoulders. Employers should think about these factors when developing their health and well-being program, but they should also think beyond providing support at the point of need. Understanding what drives stress in the workplace will help to identify targeted programs."

Additional concerns raised were:

- Lack of work-life balance (75%);
- Inadequate staffing (63%);
- *Fear over job loss* (58%); and
- Lack of support or training (30%).

Fear over Job Loss: An Overlooked Source of Stress

It's hard to imagine many workplaces where job insecurity doesn't exist these days. Although the news has been more positive recently, the current unemployment rate in the U.S. still stands at roughly 7.7%. The thing is, while everyone is looking at "John Q. Unemployed," no one is paying attention to a potentially bigger problem: job insecurity.

Job insecurity is pretty intuitive; it is worry and uncertainty about the ongoing continuity of current employment. But it's not only job loss that strikes fear into the hearts of the masses; it's also job *change*. Job insecurity includes a fear that one's role will be downgraded, outsourced, or altered in some way that is disagreeable to the individual.

The problem is; job insecurity is a pervasive and potentially more long-standing problem than unemployment. The average length of unemployment is about 35 weeks. While that's

unreasonable workload number one (17%), followed by their commute (12%).

nothing to sneeze at, the implication is that it's finite; there's a foreseeable, though distant, end. On the other hand, job insecurity can potentially go on ad infinitum.

Why it's a Problem

Those of us who experience job insecurity report elevated levels of depression and anxiety, so it's no surprise that job insecurity is associated with deterioration of psychological health. There are also physical health concerns such as negative health and well-being outcomes, and increased blood pressure, which can lead to heart attacks, strokes, migraines, and aneurisms.

However, it's not just the individual that's at risk. Job insecurity in the workplace has been shown to impact decision-making, tolerance of stress, and even attitudes towards organizations. The combination of these things can lead to a sense of helplessness in the workplace, which impacts productivity and therefore revenue. As a manager, monitoring the level of job insecurity is important because it can lead to reduced effort and performance. What happens when employees aren't performing? Managers start to worry about their own jobs. *So it's not just ourselves we have to worry about, it's also those with whom we work, and the organization at large.*

Gender Wage Gap Also Plays Role

The wage gap between men and women and how it relates to stress is also evident in various survey results. According to Everest College's third-annual survey conducted by Harris Interactive, women are more likely to say that low pay is the most stressful aspect of their job, nearly twice the rate of men (18% to 10%). Men, meanwhile, listed unreasonable workload as the leading cause of stress (14%), followed by annoying co-workers (12%). (**Editor's note**: See this month's cover story in *Employee Assistance Report* for more information about the relationship between gender/age and stress.)

Moreover, 18% of Harris survey participants with a high school diploma (or less) ranked low pay as the top stressor, followed by annoying co-workers (14%). College graduates ranked

Suggestions for Reducing Stress

❖ *Get help from an EAP* – The most popular approach to helping employees manage stress identified in the Towers Watson survey was by introducing (or better utilizing) an employee assistance program (88%). Three-quarters (73%) of employers supported flexible working hours to alleviate stress. According to Towers Watson, only a minority of companies are taking steps to

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pre-empt stress arising as an issue for their staff, with roughly one-third of firms implementing education and awareness campaigns, or having introduced risk assessments or stress audits.

"Employee assistance programs are widely seen as a valuable tool to alleviate employee concerns and any associated feelings of stress and anxiety," Haymes stated. "However, with absences due to stress on the increase there is a greater need to consider more preventative measures. This might simply be education and awareness about the signs of stress and the provision of tools to help employees cope more effectively. Even so, education and communication can go a

long way towards breaking the taboo of dealing with stress and the associated stigmas."

❖ *Take proactive measures* – For those experiencing job insecurity, there are several solutions. If you're confident that job changes are on the horizon, the best thing you can do is get ahead of the tidal wave of fear, anxiety, and unemployment, and begin to market yourself, both internally and externally. Make sure that your résumé is up-to-date at all times, and maintain your professional network. Don't be afraid of self-promotion, and make sure people know what you're up to.

In addition to actively combating potential unemployment, be smart and plan for rainy days. Make sure your monthly budget is within your means and gives you the ability to put a little something away each month. Most financial planners suggest having three to six months of savings squirreled away to cover expenses should hard times descend.

Finally, make sure that your support network is in place. Should a rainy day arrive, it will be comforting and supportive to know that those around you are willing to help you through the storm.

❖ *Make stress management a bigger priority* – While many employers are making stress management a top priority, others are not. In their defense, it is difficult for HR and benefits teams to persuade their finance colleagues of the need to invest in a new strategy in the *best* of times, let alone when the return on investment is difficult to measure.

Second, it is only when employees disclose that they are suffering stress-related symptoms that employers can respond accordingly, and disclosures remain low because of the continuing sensitivity of the issue. "Mental health is one of the last taboos in the workplace. It is extraordinarily stigmatized," added Elizabeth Cotton, a senior lecturer in human resource management.

❖ *Utilize online tools* – A number of organizations have developed online tools that can assess employee stress, psychological well-being, resilience and support, such as *the services available from an EAP*. Such support, for instance, could include an online life skills course that uses cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and consists of modules, worksheets and e-books.

Doctor Katie Tryon, head of clinical vitality at PruHealth, says the online nature of the tools, which allow remote access from home or at work, *help employers and employees overcome the challenge of anonymity*. "There are two big issues that we found when looking into stress," she says. "One is the taboo about discussing stress. Employers and employees just don't want to talk about it. And it is interesting to see how nervous employers are about opening that conversation with their employees.

"Secondly, there is a lack of [employees] wanting to seek help because of the lack of perceived anonymity of the help they receive," she adds. "People would like to seek help, but the biggest barrier is lack of anonymity and colleagues finding out that they are struggling."

❖ *Train line managers* – Too many managers are not given any training to identify stress. Such training gives managers the courage to have initial conversations with staff members suffering from stress so he or she can then connect with the employer's occupational health team. Martin Palmer, director of the Centre for Stress Management, recommends that employers identify particular *problem areas* of their business and direct their resources accordingly. "Why would employers spend resources and money in an area that hasn't got a stress problem?" he says. "Instead of just 'doing' stress management, [employers] need to *assess it*."

(Additional suggestions for reducing stress are presented in the Handout section on page 4.)

Summary

❖ Employers should play a proactive role in managing stress in the workplace.

❖ Line managers can play an important role in stress management, but they must be given suitable training.

❖ Employer should encourage staff to take responsibility for their physical and mental well-being. ∎
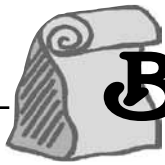
More Ideas for Reducing Stress

❖**Perform a stress audit of employees** – Conduct a stress audit of all employees, which offers a benchmark to identify areas where employees are handling stress well, and areas that need improvement. Consider the demands placed on staff, the level of control they have while at work, the support that's available, and the extent to which they understand the organization's aims and their own roles.

Then, carry out a second stress audit 12 months after the first one, in which the employer should be able to demonstrate reduced stress levels and greater levels of employee satisfaction.

After the audit, the employer may wish to introduce a new stress and well-being policy, which could also review sickness absence and related areas. "We emphasized the importance of regular one-to-one meetings between managers and their teams to ensure staff have an opportunity to talk about their workloads and any issues that are building up," said Jo Moody of Worthing Homes, which devised a stress management policy after discovering it was a major cause of absence.

❖ **Emphasize prevention measures** – "We reminded managers to inform staff about the subsidized monthly holistic therapy sessions that are available during work time," Moody said. "We also highlighted the fact that staff can request flexible hours and that we have people working different schedules, such as part time and job shares.

"As part of our action plan, we organized a one-day workshop for managers or team leaders and half-day workshops for other employees," Moody added. "The training helped staff understand stress and how it affects people, including when

stress can actually be appropriate and beneficial. It also covered stress reduction techniques."

❖ **Conduct mediation sessions** –"Many of our staff enjoyed the meditation sessions and learned practical tips to help them cope with stress better," Moody explained. "The managers also learned how to recognize stress in colleagues.

"Employers with stress management issues should remember not to panic, recognize the good practices that already exist within their organization and build on the positives," Moody added. "It is also important to view the results of any staff survey or stress audit in a wider context. For example, there may have been some exceptional targets and workload at the time the audit took place.

"Above all, remember that creating and maintaining a positive, productive working environment, and improving the health and well-being of staff helps to reduce absenteeism, retain excellent employees, and improve morale."

Source: "How to manage workplace stress," Employee Benefit News.