WORKPLACE STRESS

Supporting a global workforce

Cigna Global Health Benefits®

Work-related stress is a global issue, affecting workers in developed and developing countries alike. Greater competition internationally, ever higher performance expectations, reduced job security and longer working hours fuelled by increased connectivity are all contributing to an ever more stressful working environment.[1]

Internationally the same causes of work-related stress are present, although different regions have found variances in prominence. For the Americas, Europe, Central Asia and Asia-Pacific regions the greatest concerns are; workload, in particular tight deadlines, and too much pressure or responsibility. Other issues are lack of support from management and other people issues, such as conflict with colleagues, dealing with organizational change, unsatisfactory work life balance and uncertainty around job roles.[1,2,3]

The cost of work stress

Stress factors at work have a proven effect on mental health and can cause depressive symptoms.[4] It also increases the likelihood of serious physical conditions, such as heart disease and stroke.[3]

Stress does not only have a detrimental impact on individuals, it poses a financial burden to organizations, and furthermore to society at large. In the UK alone, 15.4 million working days were lost due to work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2017/20, accounting for 57% of all working days lost to ill health.[2] A systematic review looked at studies from several high income economic countries, including Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The total estimated cost of work-related stress was considerable and ranged substantially from USD $221.13 million to USD $187 billion. Most of the losses, between 70–90%, are related to productivity, with health care and medical costs making up the remaining 10–30%.[5]

Where there is an identified loss, subsequently there is an opportunity presented. If work stress can be prevented or lowered its damaging consequences, and resulting costs, can also be reduced.

A positive workplace has the power to not just maintain, but improve employee psychological health by increasing self-confidence and satisfaction. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that for every USD $1 invested into scaled up treatment for common mental disorders, there is a return of USD $4 in improved health and productivity.[6]

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Work stress in developing countries

Less is known about employee health risk factors in developing countries compared to developed countries. The existing studies however do demonstrate that stress is a common global issue. In fact, one study that looked at the employees of multinational companies found greater levels of anxiety and depression in those working in developing countries.[7] Research looking at health care workers in Ethiopia and Nigeria reported high prevalence rates of up to 68.2% in workplace stress, with women, people working 50 hours or more per week, and night shift workers more likely to develop job-related stress.[8,9]

Due to reduced regulation, employees in developing countries may also face increased health risks within the workplace such as toxic chemicals, unsafe levels of noise and heat and dangerous machinery.[7,10] As in developed countries, people working under stress or with dangerous employment conditions are more likely to make riskier lifestyle choices such as smoking, taking less exercise and eating unhealthy foods.[11] These factors in turn increase the risk of developing chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, COPD and cancers. Predictably, factors more common in developing countries, such as violent political instability, poor living conditions, lack of access to housing and recreational activities also has a detrimental impact on mental health.[11]

The far reaching impact of stress

"Burnout" is result of long-term unmanaged stress at work. The WHO created headlines when they officially recognized burn-out as an occupational phenomenon, characterized by the following three aspects[12]:

- › Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- › Increased mental distance, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job
- › Reduced professional efficacy

It is obvious that the consequences of chronic stress are something every company would wish to avoid amongst their employees, as it is likely to result in absenteeism, presenteeism, or both.

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3. **Reduced professional efficacy.**

The relationship between stress, and absenteeism and presenteeism

Stress has a substantial negative impact on both absenteeism and presenteeism. Absenteeism is an employee's intentional or habitual absence from work, presenteeism occurs when an employee is present at work when unwell or ill, or works excessive hours to present as a hard worker and important to their employer.[13]

Howarth et al. 2017 looked at the health risk assessments (HRA) of employees working for multinational companies in developed and developing countries. They found that the biggest predictors of presenteeism in descending order were: region of residency, stress, perception of general health, job satisfaction, pain, mood, sleep, working hours, anxiety and/or depression and lastly age. While for absenteeism, the biggest predictors in descending order were: pain, age, perception of general health, stress, gender, sleep, BMI, having dependents and lastly, mood.[7]

Biggest predictors of presenteeism and absenteeism in global working populations

While stress is an individual factor in the causes of both absenteeism and presenteeism, the evidence shows that it can also worsen other factors; notably pain, sleep, BMI, mood and depression. Broader physiological changes may be partially due to the body's reaction to, particularly chronic, stress resulting in hormonal dysfunction including increased levels of cortisol, the stress hormone.[4,14]

The influence of demands, resources and control at work

According to the Job-Demands Resources (JDR) theory every job has demands, yet it also has job resources that can act as a buffer. Adverse work conditions are associated with high levels of demands, coupled with a lack of resources.[15] Exposure to such job conditions can lead to stress among employees, resulting in decreased performance and motivation, and potentially serious health problems.
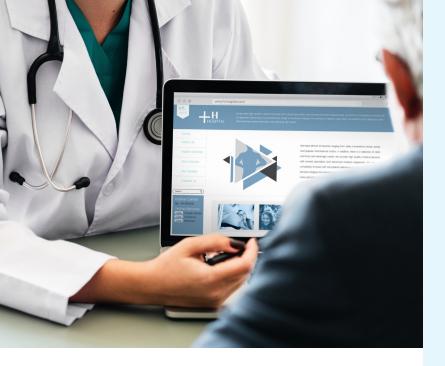

Reducing stressors in the workplace

To reduce the harmful effects of workplace stress, a company can take action to reduce risk factors and improve available resources. This would include identifying areas to improving workload and management support, and improving internal change management systems. Strategies suggested by the World Economic Forum focus on demands, knowledge and abilities, support and control.[16]

Implement and enforce health and safety policies and practices: including identification of distress, illness, and substance misuse, and provide resources to manage them.

Programs for career development: to ensure employees have or develop the appropriate knowledge and abilities to perform their jobs effectively through training and progress reviews.

Inform staff that support is available: provide structures for encouragement from line management, HR colleagues and resources, such as employee assistance programs (IEAP), provided by the organization.

Involve employees in decision-making: identify opportunities for an employee to have personal input in the way they do their work and participation in small or large organizational changes.

Support a healthy work-life balance: through initiatives such as flex time and job-sharing.

Recognize and reward the contribution of employees: by providing channels for managers and colleagues to recognize achievements.
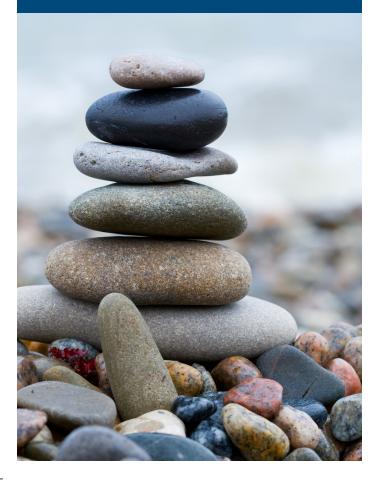
Building resilience

Stress cannot be eliminated however and is not necessarily a bad thing. Some pressure is required to create feelings of motivation, impetus and resulting work satisfaction.[1] It is also difficult for a company to predict the individual perception on stressors. For example, a survey of police officers found their administrative burden the most stressful part of their job, rather than being on the front line.[3] Therefore it is vital that companies promote resilience as a resource in their employees – the ability to bounce back and better handle stress. It has been found that workers with higher resilience fare better in difficult work environments.[17] Fortunately resilience is a skill that can be learned and built by employees, and digital training has been shown to be an effective approach.[17,18]

Aspects or skills that can improve resilience include[17,18]:

> **Developing positive, problem-solving coping strategies**

> **Forming supportive social connections**

> **Building self-efficacy, the confidence in ability to achieve a given task**

> **Developing perseverance**

> **Taking a different perspective to understand the viewpoints of others**

> **Practicing mindfulness**

Employees with high resilience have better outcomes in difficult work environments, furthermore resilience is an attribute that can be learned.

A holistic approach

Evidence shows that stress can affect pain, sleep, and maintaining a healthy weight, and it is important to recognize that the relationship is two-way. Sleeping and eating better, and being more active can all benefit psychological wellbeing by reducing stress or the risk of depression.[19–21] Therefore any workplace solution to reduce stress and its possible consequences on health should be multifactorial, looking at wellness as a whole.

Employer interventions can help bring about positive health improvements in their staff and the ubiquitous role of the internet in our daily lives has meant digital health solutions are playing an increasing role in this. A recent review found digital-only interventions are able to bring about improvement in a broad range of outcomes such as mental health, sleep, sedentary behaviors and physical activity levels, which could have a beneficial effect for workplace stress.[22]

Digital solutions have been proven to bring improvements in workers' health in both developed and developing countries.

Cigna's position

Stress is an unavoidable part of life but employers can take steps to create a workplace culture that minimizes the harmful effects to protect employees, resulting in reduced costs. Solutions should ideally take a holistic approach to building resilience and effectively combating stress and its far reaching effects. Cigna can help our customers with a range of well-being services that help support employees in the modern workforce:

International Employee Assistance Program (IEAP)*: Counseling and support available on a wide range of topics, not only career advice but legal and financial issues, emotional health including relationships and family life, and substance use.

Global Telehealth: Convenient access to quality health care. Consultations with a licensed doctor via a secure video or phone conversation to discuss health issues.

Digital Well-being Solutions: A range of personalized programs to help make successful and long-lasting lifestyle changes. Accessible anytime, solutions include health assessments and targeted health improvement programs not only to build resilience, but to encourage activity, healthy eating and better sleep.

*Legal consultations about employment matters are not available under this program.

While the workplace can be a source of stress, it is also perfectly positioned to address challenges and support employees to meet the demands of modern working life.

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