Hidden hazards in the workplace

For many of us, thinking ‘hazard’ in relation to the chemistry workplace might conjure images of physical injury. But stress and bullying are much bigger contributors to lost productivity, largely because they are easy for organisations to ignore.

Workplaces are wonderful communities of different people with different experiences and different expectations. The mix of these factors provides a rich environment in which people can interact, contribute and grow. Most workplaces also have a number of hidden hazards – two of the most significant are stress and bullying. Both issues lead to reduced productivity, engagement and commitment, and increased absenteeism, claims and turnover.

Stress is one of the easiest, but most costly, workplace issues to ignore. Employees don’t like to admit they’re stressed, managers find it hard to know when and how to alleviate staff from the worries that burden them, and stress is a difficult cost to measure, which often means employers do nothing.

Medibank Private estimate that stress-related absenteeism and presenteeism is costing Australian employers $10.1 billion a year. An average of 3.2 days per employee per annum is being lost to absenteeism related to workplace stress.

Workplace stress can result from a range of factors including excessive work hours, unreasonable performance demands, poor communication, job insecurity and poor relationships with managers to name a few. You can’t isolate work-related stress from other stress – but you do need to monitor and manage the stress being applied in the workplace.

Three of the most common drivers of stress are job value and workload, financial pressure and organisational change. Employment plays a significant role in our self-esteem, regardless of job and regardless of level. Employees feel most valued when they know they have a job that matters and are supported to build skills and receive feedback on how they’re performing. Individual workload is an issue of increasing concern – more than one in three employees feel burdened and overwhelmed by their workload, it is a common factor in suicide attempts, and in Australia workload issues have increased more than 63% in the past two years.

The level of financial stress being experienced in Australia has increased by 92% in the past two years and more than half the Australian population indicate that dealing with money is stressful and overwhelming.

Most organisations undergo some form of change each year. In some cases change is minor; in other cases it may involve significant restructuring, redundancy and changed work practices. Regrettably most organisations do not prepare their
employees well for the post-change reality and individual coping mechanisms are challenged.

Our ability to cope is not important just so we can survive; it is important because resilience is what makes people and organisations great. Our ability to cope with change is in most cases higher than we expect, but can be significantly improved by building resilience in the workforce.

The second major hazard is bullying – repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed toward an employee, or group of employees, that creates a hazard to health and safety. In the past year there have been a number of high-profile bullying cases in the media, but this issue is far too common in all organisations. The latest major survey on bullying behaviour indicated that 13% of employees are experiencing bullying right now – and a further 24% have experienced bullying previously. That is, 37% of employees are, or have been, bullied.

If we translate that to the Australian workforce participation rate, there are 4 million employees in Australia who are experiencing bullying now, or have experienced it previously. This is a totally unacceptable number.

Bullying does not discriminate – males, females, junior staff and executives are all targets. The most common forms of bullying are verbal abuse, intimidation, humiliation, abuse of authority, interference with work performance and destruction of workplace relationships.

The personal impact of bullying is high, with 45% of people bullied experiencing a stress-related health complication such as anxiety, headaches, sleeplessness, hair loss, panic attacks, tearfulness, back pain, stomach ulcers … the list goes on.

The World Health Organisation has described the job stress caused by workplace bullying as an international epidemic.

Addressing the issues of stress and bullying in the workplace is not easy, but it is critical for the health and wellbeing of your employees and your organisation. First you need to commit to reducing the problem and then actively working towards that through a staged plan.

• Assess your hazard – use the data you have to determine the scale of the problem. Look at absenteeism including sudden spikes in unplanned absence, ability to attract internal candidates or numbers requesting transfer out, turnover including reviewing your exit interview data. And look at employee-engagement measures and opinion survey data.

• Have current and correct policies in place and then promote them so that every employee knows and understands the policies and how to raise and address issues as they arise. This is supported by ensuring your organisational values are understood by everyone and they are modelled and measured.

• Educate your workforce with a particular focus on managers. The key areas are management skills, resilience, communication, performance management including giving and receiving feedback, and conflict management.

Michelle Grow mgrow@davcorp.com.au is Chief Executive Officer of Davidson Trahaire Corpsych, a provider of employee assistance programs and related corporate psychology services.

---

**Minimising hazard**

To minimise your hazard, invest the time to evaluate your current position and educate your workforce.

- Be clear about the policies and the expectations you have of your people.
- Be very clear about the behaviours that will not be tolerated.
- Train your managers in how to address or escalate issues early.
- Ensure everyone knows the support mechanisms available (e.g. EAP, GP, Harassment Contact Officer).
- Don’t wait for an incident to occur before you act.

---

Techstaff.
The catalyst for scientific careers.

Servicing Australia’s leading scientific and technical employers for over 20 years.

Be first to know about the best chemistry roles; register at www.techstaff.com.au

VIC: 03 9864 6050          NSW: 02 9432 3333          QLD: 07 3347 7600
www.techstaff.com.au