

Keep workers fresh to boost productivity

May is Mental Health Month and the right time to evaluate workplace mental health as both supervisors and workers continue to deal with the struggling economy.

Stress, depression and an overall feeling of anxiety are affecting everyday duties inside and outside the work corridors. At the end of 2008, 58 percent of Americans reported struggling in their lives, which was an increase of more than 22 million Americans a year earlier.

It may be the fear of job loss.

It may be the bills that keep piling up.

It may be the house that won't sell.

It may be caring for an aging parent or young children.

With negativity spreading throughout the office watercooler talk and boardroom alike, it is all too easy to jump on the dormant bandwagon; emphasizing old processes and causing many employees to feel like their jobs are as stagnant as the economy. However, human resources is needed more than ever to establish stability, motivate employees and provide guidance for employees to stay productive and well.

The relationship of health and productivity

Poor mental and physical health among U.S. workers is costing employers much more than many realize in reduced productivity, according to a study published in the April Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine. Presenteeism – when employees are physically present at work but unable to perform at optimal capacity – creates a greater drain on company productivity than employee absence.



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The study also noted that when medical and drug costs along with productivity losses are accounted for, the five costliest conditions for employers are depression, obesity, arthritis, back/neck pain and anxiety. At a time when productivity is more important than ever to the bottom line, employers must actively promote health and wellness.

In the recent Freddie Mac CFO suicide case, the human resources chief expressed concern in the days before that the employee was spending too much time at work and was physically and emotionally exhausted. After the fact, the CEO encouraged employees to utilize employee assistance program services. But, companies must be proactive to encourage usage of free resources, including education and training and wellness services.

Creating a culture of awareness, wellness

If your company provides an employee assistance program, request communication materials promoting the services, include payroll staffers, publish the program contact information in the employee newsletter and use posters to spread awareness. Employers also can provide an array of other ancillary programs to support mental health and wellness. Features

such as online Web portals allow employees access to work/life services at the touch of the keyboard. Research has shown that employees often feel more comfortable utilizing these programs because of the ease and availability of access.

Although services such as personal legal consultations, virtual concierges and child/elder care resources may not seem important as a business tool, many employees value these services. During unusually busy times at work and when work/life balance is hard to achieve, these services provide an easy solution for personal inquiries. Many employee assistance programs have also extended their free visits to include financial consultants, noting that if an employee is struggling with a financial issue it will bleed into their emotional health and, in turn, productivity at work.

With increasing troubles piled on to the stress of work and family demands, we will continue to see more employees suffering from mental illnesses. National Mental Health Month was created to raise awareness about mental health conditions and the importance of mental wellness in our personal and professional lives. The theme for the 2009 Mental Health Month is "Live Your Life Well."

Make a decision in May to encourage your employees to live their life well and seek assistance when they need it. Getting well is only the first part of the process. Staying well is the real challenge.

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