



Safety

Mental Health and the Workplace: Why It Pays to Support Manufacturing Workers

Roland Jones | Nov 12, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the working lives of millions of Americans, increasing stress and emphasizing the need to improve the mental health challenges brought by work. Here's how supporting the mental health of employees can have positive benefits for your business.

With around **42 percent of the U.S. labor force now working from home** full time, and most production employees in the manufacturing industry **encouraged to work staggered shifts**, it's safe to say COVID-19 has had a huge impact on our working lives.

For those working from home, a return to the office likely won't come for some time. Public health orders, rising infection rates and employers' demands to cut overhead (and workers' demands for greater flexibility) will mean working from home will likely become a permanent feature of the working world.

Workers in industries such as manufacturing, who don't have the luxury of performing their duties from home, face other challenges: worrying about possible exposure to the virus while relying on workplace safety measures designed to keep employees safe, such as frequent cleaning and sanitizing of work areas, splitting work shifts and using social distancing rules.

"With more organizations becoming aware of the link between well-being and productivity, now is a good time for employers to take steps to create a sense of community among employees online and look to tackle the well-being challenges posed by the shift to remote work."

Whatever the industry, the COVID-19 crisis has brought workplace well-being to the fore, making mental health support a top concern for employers as more employees struggle with increased anxiety, isolation and depression due to remote work and other anxieties related to the pandemic, including fear of the virus itself and prolonged physical distancing. There are even **reports of a spike in musculoskeletal injuries** for workers as they make do with kitchen tables, sofas and other less-than-ideal workspaces.

Managing Mental Health and Stress in the Workplace

Working remotely can improve flexibility for workers, but it can also be stressful. While employers may introduce policies to help workers cope, there are steps employees can take, too. Here are some ***recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)*** for managing mental health and stress in the workplace:

- Encourage employers to offer mental health and stress management education and programs that meet their needs and interests, if they are not already in place.
- Participate in employer-sponsored programs and activities to learn skills and get the support they need to improve their mental health.
- Serve as dedicated wellness champions and participate in trainings on topics such as financial planning and how to manage unacceptable behaviors and attitudes in the workplace as a way to help others, when appropriate.
- Share personal experiences with others to help reduce stigma, when appropriate.
- Be open-minded about the experiences and feelings of colleagues. Respond with empathy, offer peer support and encourage others to seek help.
- Adopt behaviors that promote stress management and mental health.
- Eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise regularly and get seven to eight hours of sleep a night.
- Take part in activities that promote stress management and relaxation, such as yoga, meditation, mindfulness or tai chi.
- Build and nurture real-life, face-to-face social connections.
- Take the time to reflect on positive experiences and express happiness and gratitude.
- Set and work toward personal, wellness and work-related goals and ask for help when it is needed.

Read more: How to Manage Employee Anxiety in the Workplace During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Mental Well-Being and the Pandemic

A recent Harvard University study sheds some light on the widespread mental health impact of the pandemic.

The ***Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health's*** SHINE program looked at the workplace well-being of 1,271 participants in 17 industries including agriculture, manufacturing, construction, finance, arts and healthcare. It found widespread impacts from COVID-19, including 32 percent saying their job security had decreased, 44 percent saying household income had declined, and 40 percent reporting an increased workload.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental well-being was already a challenge for employers. A workplace health survey conducted by ***Mental Health America in 2017***, for example, found that 63 percent of respondents reported that workplace stress had resulted in a significant impact on their mental and

behavioral health.

Richard Pierson, CEO of Headspace, an app that offers daily guided meditation sessions for workplaces, noted in a recent interview that corporations are taking greater interest in the mental well-being of their employees. Mental health used to be a conversation in 10 percent of boardrooms, **he told the business news channel CNBC**, adding that it's likely "happening in every single boardroom now."

The pandemic has significantly impacted workers and their ability to handle stress this year, **according to research and advisory company Gartner**. The company's research noted causes such as worries about the economy, job security and health.

"The amount of change employees can absorb without fatigue—negative reactions to change such as burnout, frustration or apathy—has plummeted at a time when more change is precisely what organizations need in order to reset," noted Jessica Knight, vice president in Gartner's human resources practice.

Innovative Ways to Find Help

Employers appear to be noticing that the well-being of their workforce is a productivity issue as well as a health concern. Gartner's research notes that employers should consider an "open source" approach to change management that **actively engages employees**. Doing so can increase the probability of change success by as much as 24 percentage points, the company found.

Many employers have responded by increasing employee access to mental health benefits, assistance programs and flexible schedules, or by improving communication between management and employees about policies and planning.

More than two-thirds of employers currently provide access to online mental health support resources such as apps, videos and articles, and that number is expected to rise to 88 percent in 2021, according to **the 2021 Large Employers' Health Care Strategy and Plan Design Survey**, which was conducted between May and June 2020.

Investing in the well-being of your workforce can pay dividends. **A recent study by Oxford's Saïd Business School** offers evidence that happier workers are better at their jobs, and therefore contribute to the company's bottom line.

Read more: COVID-19 Social Distancing: Technologies and Tactics to Keep Your Workers Safe

The research followed telesales workers at British Telecom and found a clear causal relationship between happiness and productivity. Workers reported their happiness levels each week, and the researchers noted such outside influences as a worker's access to windows while at work and the presence of gloomy or bright weather outside each call center. These factors were used to "derive quasi-experimental estimates for the causal effect of happiness on productivity."

"We show that being in a positive mood has a significant impact on the number of sales made by employees," the researchers wrote. "We find that when workers are happier, they work faster by making more calls per hour worked and, more importantly for sales, manage to convert more of these calls to sales (while maintaining customer satisfaction)."

With the pandemic likely to be with us for the foreseeable future, the newly remote and hybrid workplace is sure to be a feature of our lives for some time to come.

With more organizations becoming aware of the link between well-being and productivity, now is a good time for employers to take steps to create a sense of community among employees online and look to tackle the well-being challenges posed by the shift to remote work.

What strategies or technologies are you using to try to improve employee well-being? What have you found most successful? Share your thoughts in the comments below.

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