

How businesses can minimize workplace pain, boost productivity

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Recently released government data reveals an unsettling trend: Fewer workers doing more work. According to the Bureau of Labor



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Statistics, the national unemployment rate stands at 9.8 percent, with productivity climbing by 2.3 percent from November to December. The numbers here in Florida are even more striking, with the state's 12 percent jobless rate ranking among the five highest in the United States.

Unfortunately for businesses, this dynamic comes with a hidden cost: Research shows that overworked employees are at a greater risk of experiencing workplace injuries and chronic pain. In

fact, work-related pain causes an average of 50 million lost workdays each year according to the American Pain Foundation, costing employers an estimated \$100 billion annually.

Factor in the ancillary costs associated with employee absenteeism, hiring and training replacements, and productivity loss, and the total dollar figure soars to more than \$200 billion. To further complicate the matter, projections indicate that employers are likely to see an average increase of 9 percent in their healthcare costs this year.

Conventional wisdom suggests that the employees most at risk of suffering an injury while on the job are those who regularly perform heavy labor. But even desk-bound employees can fall victim to such chronic injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome, eye strain and back pain, which is the lead-

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ing cause of productivity loss for businesses and the costliest healthcare problem for people ages 30 to 50. Beyond the physical workplace, the psychological work environment can also have also a powerful effect on employee stress levels, which is a common risk factor for injuries.

With the start of 2011 upon us, now is an ideal time for companies to evaluate their work environment and make adjustments aimed at minimizing and eliminating risk factors that can lead to pain and injury down the road. Fortunately, many of these modifications can be made easily and affordably.

For starters, we advise

companies to survey their employees to gain an accurate understanding of how staff members work and perceive their day-to-day environment. This process can be conducted through formal surveys or casual conversations. We recommend companies conduct these analyses annually, or every time there is a significant restructuring, change in job duties, job placement, or work conditions. However, employees should be encouraged to communicate these matters to managers on an ongoing basis. It's also good practice to include this discussion during the annual performance evaluation process.

While no two workplaces are alike and each company faces its own unique challenges, the following tips often go a long way in keeping an office pain-free.

Employees should have comfortable, supportive, adjustable chairs. Workstations should allow for computer monitors to be aligned at eye level, have keyboard and mouse placed conveniently and comfortably, and include a document stand for reference materials. If the employee wears glasses or contacts, ensure he or she takes particular care to reduce headaches, blurred vision, eye strain and muscle tension.

Just as important as the physical workplace is the psychological environment. Workplace stress can place wear and tear on the body as a result of worry, anxiety, or exhaustion. This is becoming common among workers who fear for their jobs, perform the work of more than one employee, or have experienced reduced wages. Employers must pay as much attention to the psychological work environ-

ment as the physical workplace if they are to maximize morale and productivity.

While every workplace may have elements of psychological stressors, employers can implement measures to address them. Examples include improving light and ventilation, implementing work-rest schedules, job rotation, offering brown-bag sessions on stress management, and implementing employee wellness programs. Some companies even offer massage therapy on the job.

Budget aside, companies of all sizes can take measures to understand and manage the demands on an employee's endurance, concentration, and mental resilience with the goals of maintaining appropriate and safe levels of attentiveness, acuity, work pace and judgment.

By following these simple guidelines, business owners can address workplace risk factors before they escalate to expensive problems. These steps, combined with proper job education and training, can be a big boost for a company's bottom line in 2011.

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