

Work stress and mental health

HIGHER EXPECTATIONS: Workers face greater pressure to meet employers' demands due to the changing nature of work structure

TODAY is World Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Day. The purpose of this annual event is to honour the memory of victims of occupational accidents and diseases.

Being a member of the international community, Malaysia celebrates World OSH Day and regards it as an integral part of our national mission and strategy to promote a preventative safety and health culture at all workplaces.

The theme of this year's World OSH Day is "Workplace Stress: A Collective Challenge".

Stress can be common at the workplace due to the demands of the contemporary work environment. However, excessive and unmanageable stress can be damaging to employees' health as it affects their mental and physical wellbeing.

Work-related stress is one of the most challenging issues in occupational safety and health (OSH) today. It is a growing concern around the world as it has a significant impact on the health of employees, the productivity of organisations and the nation's economy.

Stress, if not managed well, can be very costly to the workers and organisation. Stress in the workplace can manifest as absenteeism or habitual absence from work and presenteeism, being present at work despite being sick. Both contribute to a loss of productivity. Stressful workers can also contribute to higher accident and injury rates.

Stress suffered by workers may result in mental health problems such

as anxiety and depressive disorder. Prolonged stress can lead to the development of physical health issues, including cardiovascular diseases and musculoskeletal disorders.

The National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) conducted by the Health Ministry last year revealed that the incidence of mental health problems was higher among younger adults — those in the 16-19 age group accounted for 34.7 per cent and those in the 20-24 age group accounted for 32.1 per cent.

The study found that the prevalence of mental health problems among people aged 16 and above is 29.2 per cent. This is a marked increase from the same study done in 2006, which reported a figure of 11.2 per cent. It also revealed a higher prevalence of mental health problems among adults from low household income families. By occupation, the prevalence was lowest among government and semi-government employees.

Mental health is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a state of wellbeing upon which an individual realises his or her potential, can cope with normal stress every day, work productively and contribute to society. Therefore, workers need to achieve a good state of mental health to be able to function and be at their best performance.

The changing nature of work structure in today's world is contributing to psychosocial risks at the workplace as workers face greater pressure to meet work demands, increased competition and higher expectations. Longer working hours and work-home interface are becoming more common as the pace of work is dictated by instant communications.

Global competition and increasing labour market flexibility have

resulted in more precarious and insecure jobs, which is also contributing to a stressful work environment.

The economic downturn poses greater psychosocial risks in the workplace as organisations undergo reorganisation, restructuring or downsizing, where workers face the possibility of reduced job security, mass retrenchment, fewer job opportunities, decreased financial stability and increased personal debt.

Causes of Stress at Workplace

Work-related stress occurs when demands and pressures do not match employees' knowledge, abilities and coping skills. Poor work design, work organisation and management can contribute to psychosocial risks to employees that can lead to negative outcomes such as work-related stress, burnout and depression.

Conditions that can bring about workplace stress include excessive workloads, lack of role clarity or conflicting roles, job insecurity, poorly managed organisation, lack of support from higher management and ineffective communication.

Other factors include interpersonal conflict, physical and psychological abuse, sexual harassment, violence and lack of support from colleagues and spouse for work-home interface.

Managing Stress at Workplace

Considering the serious implications of stress at the workplace, organisations need to consider work-related stress and psychosocial risks as part of their safety and health strategy.

Organisations should implement plans to prevent or reduce stress and help create a healthy psychosocial work environment. It is necessary to create organisational functions and culture that can reduce workplace stress.

Primary prevention include tak-

ing care of ergonomics, work environment and organisational development. This is followed by secondary prevention measures that incorporate education and training for the workers.

These are essential especially when employers and employees may not recognise symptoms of stress or psychosocial risks such as a mild form of depression like burnout and dysthymia.

Employers should undertake risk management approaches such as conducting situational analysis, formulating an action plan to reduce risk, implementing screening for early detection and having a flow chart for management and referral.

In today's challenging work environment, it is also necessary to strengthen social support in the workplace. Peer support group is helpful in reducing pressure and worry among employees.

For individual stress management, an employee should strive to improve his communication and problem-solving skills. Employees should possess anger management skills and good time management so that they have better coping abilities. It would also be helpful for employees to learn relaxation techniques and adopt healthy lifestyles.

Work-related stress must not be overlooked when discussing OSH issues. Managing stress at work will create a healthy work environment in which workers feel valued, the workplace culture is more positive and, consequently, business performance will improve as workers become more productive and customers are better served and their needs met.

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