Don't Just Sleep On It — Sleep Deprivation Can Be A Serious Problem For Employees And Employers

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Employers often ignore a serious issue in the workplace — sleep-deprived employees. Recent research and analysis has shown that employees who are not getting enough sleep or are not getting proper sleep are at greater risk of accidents, long-term health complications and can have poor work productivity.

Consider this from the National Post, April 3, 2017 — Crying Baby Could Cut Income by 11%: Study: " …Just one hour less sleep each night can reduce household income by up to 11 percent, researchers from the London School of Economics found. Joan Costa-i-Font, associate professor of political economy at the school, said lack of sleep led to fatigue, which could 'undermine economic performance'. He presented the research at the Royal Society of Economics' annual conference in Bristol Wednesday, saying: 'Sleep is often overlooked in economics models despite its obvious restorative effects on human health.'"

It has been shown that sleep deprivation significantly reduces performance and alertness, memory and cognitive ability.

Quoted from Vicki Bell — How Sleep Deprivation Affects Work Performance: "The National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimates conservatively that each year drowsy drivers are responsible for at least 100,000 automobile crashes, 71,000 injuries and 1,550 fatalities."

Sleep disorders can also result in many serious illnesses such as high blood pressure, heart attack, heart failure, stroke and psychiatric problems.

Why Should Employers *be* Concerned?

- Sleep deprivation and sleep disorders can affect the “bottom line” of an employer because of poor productivity, increased accidents and cognitive impairment.
- Sleep deprivation and sleep disorders can result in preventable accidents. All employers need to be concerned about that and, of course, high accident rates result in high costs for employers.

- High-profile, significant accidents have been traced back in part to sleep deprivation. For example, it was reported that in the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in which a nuclear plant in Ukraine exploded, the two engineers involved had been working for 13 hours or more at the time of the explosion. Another severe example is the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, which caused the second-largest oil spill in the United States' history. In that accident, the evidence was that the third mate, who was operating the ship, may have been awake for up to 18 hours before the oil tanker struck Bligh Reef at just past midnight.
- Difficulty sleeping or improper sleep can especially be a problem for shift workers and can influence long-term health, resulting in worker illness, disability claims and absenteeism.

What Should an Employer *do*?

Because every employer is interested in better productivity, long-term health of employees and preventing accidents, every employer should be concerned about employees who have sleep deprivation or sleep disorders such as insomnia, sleep apnea, etc.

An employer can help address these issues by doing the following:

1. provide education to your employees about the importance of sufficient and effective sleep including videos, guest lectures and informative articles;
2. provide counselling (such as EAP or extended health benefits counselling) for employees with sleep issues such as sleep apnea, insomnia or difficulty with shift work;
3. encourage a nap or meditation on lunch breaks rather than discouraging sleeping at work. This may require appropriate facilities, but if they exist, a short nap in the middle of the work day can help refresh an employee, improving productivity and reducing accidents;
4. in post-accident investigations, you should investigate employees' sleep issues if they are relevant; and
5. consider using some form of "impairment testing" in the workplace, particularly after accidents or for employees working in safety-sensitive positions. You may prevent accidents before they happen and also help identify employees with sleep issues so that they can be assisted.

It is an important consideration for every employer — don't sleep on it!

By

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