Tired employees dragging the workplace down?

We all know there’s more to work than “just showing up,” yet that’s what many workers may be doing according to the 2008 National Sleep Foundation (NSF) survey, “Sleep, Performance and the Workplace.” In fact, about 63 percent of American workers reported they just accept the fact that they’re sleepy and keep going. Unfortunately, an employee who is less than fully engaged at work can negatively impact the workplace in a number of ways, including productivity and safety.

Just look at the statistics below and think about how they might affect your workplace:

- Almost 30 percent of those polled reported falling asleep or becoming very sleepy at least one time each month while at work.
- 36 percent said they had fallen asleep while driving.
- 19 percent reported personal injuries or accidents while on the job in the past year.

Additionally, report by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), "Drowsy Driving and Automobile Crashes," said there are about 56,000 crashes each year in which driver drowsiness/fatigue is cited by police. As a result of these crashes, there are about 40,000 nonfatal injuries and 1,550 fatalities. Although even those numbers do not give the full picture, NHTSA says, “it is widely recognized that these statistics underreport the extent of these types of crashes.”

But there’s more...

In some cases, the employer may be held responsible for accidents caused by tired employees. In April 2009, a New Jersey Appellate Court (Riley v. Keenan) considered the issue of whether or not an employer could be held liable for an auto accident caused by a tired employee who fell asleep while driving home. (Courts in Oregon and West Virginia have already held employers liable for accidents caused by tired employees.) The New Jersey case involved a truck driver who began his shift at 3:30 a.m., drove the 10 hours allowed by law, but then worked overtime doing mechanical repairs in the company’s shop. In the month the accident occurred, the employee had been working between 120 and 130 hours per week. While the plaintiff’s attorney argued for the employer to bear some responsibility, other circumstances came into play.

On the day of the accident, the employee worked his 10-hour shift, then went to a bar and had a few beers. At the time of the accident, his blood alcohol level would have been .16. Furthermore, he had not worked any mechanic hours during that week.

Given the other specifics in this case, the court did not agree that the employer should bear any liability for the accident. However, they did leave the door open for other potential cases, saying that while the Appellate Division did not find that the defendant’s employer could be held liable under the circumstances of this case, the court would leave open the possibility that an employer could be held liable for an accident caused by a sleep-deprived employee under circumstances where the employer’s actions create a foreseeable risk that the employee’s ability to drive safely would be impaired.

And, while most of us are aware of the extensive costs associated with injuries and accidents, there are other less noticeable ways in which drowsy employees impact the workplace—where their actions and productivity levels, compounded over time, negatively affect the company’s bottom line.

Errors, mishaps & deletions (Oh my!)

Depending on your work environment, there’s any number of things that can go wrong if people aren’t fully engaged. In a survey of 1200 people conducted by the Worklife Balance Center and Keele University in England, researchers found that 95 percent of those polled reported they had made a mistake at work in the past due to fatigue. While most errors reported were small, some were life threatening.

Consider some of the “errors” below attributed to being tired on the job:

- Loss of temper with colleague or manager
- Lost data or documents
- Drug administration error
- Poor management of work force
- Miscommunication/ineffective communication with co-workers
- Missed crucial fact in grant application
- Failed to follow accounting procedures correctly
- Forgot to cancel a contract in time
- Forwarded a confidential e-mail
- Almost caused an accident on the highway
- Mishandled a toxic chemical
- Missed safety issues that could have resulted in injury to people
- Mixed up infectious waste: breach of containment
- Sent the wrong price quote to the wrong client

It’s interesting to consider how many issues such as these might be occurring in your workplace…and how many might be caused, at least in part, by tired employees?

Healthy habits

Of course, getting good sleep and reporting to work ready to meet the challenges of the day

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Tired (continued from previous page)
is tied to lifestyle. Eating healthy foods, getting fresh air and regular exercise all contribute to restful, restorative sleep. An employee suffering from acid reflux at night may not be getting the rest they need due to poor eating habits, likewise, too much caffeine or alcohol may also contribute to sleep problems.

Sleep apnea, often associated with obesity, will cause a person to be fatigued during the day. Medications can also cause sleep problems as a side effect, so it makes sense to stay as healthy as possible so that fewer medications, if any, are required. And these are just a few examples of how general health can impact sleep.

But mental health issues can also cause a person not to get the rest they need, in fact, stress is considered the “number one” cause of sleep difficulties by most sleep experts. In the Worklife Balance Center and Keele University study, the employees who said they felt stressed also said stress was causing them to feel fatigued (47 percent), be irritable (41 percent), have sleepless nights (40 percent) and have poor concentration (34 percent).

Home or job stress, relationship issues, financial worries, a death in the family…these represent some of the psychological issues your employees may be confronting. And often, sleep problems may be a combination of the physical and psychological—for example, the employee who abuses alcohol, has marital problems and constantly feels financially stressed.

Let your EAP help
As your employee assistance program (EAP), Ease@Work offers educational programs on nutrition, exercise and stress management, along with the individual counseling available to employees and their family members. Employee education about all of the many EAP services starts with you—your organization’s HR professionals and managers.

Remember to:
- Place flyers and promotional materials in highly visible places, such as in lunchrooms, by time clocks, employee information boards or even restrooms
- Ask your Ease account representative to present a reorientation or EaseyAccess demo during a staff meeting
- Host an Ease visibility table
- Offer a seminar on a topic pertinent to your employees’ health and wellness issues
- Make soft referrals when appropriate
- Call for a consultation when you’re not sure what to do in a particular situation
- Use the management referral process for job performance issues


WE KNOW PEOPLE
Taking personal accountability personally
As health care costs continue to rise, employees grumble and employers groan. HR continues on its mission to ultimately lower costs all-around for must-needed benefits. But how? Rather than relying on multiple prescriptions and procedures to flip us back to health, we’ve heard that personal accountability and care of one’s own health can play a significant role in prevention...saving dollars upon dollars for all. Every employer does not have a wellness program, or encourage healthy activity inside or outside the workplace. That can change by choosing to take a proactive role and implementing a wellness program in your workplace. EASE@Work is well-equipped to answer your questions regarding workplace wellness. We have many avenues and professionals who can help increase the knowledge, energy and vitality of your employees. Whether looking to conduct a Health Fair, seeking to launch a wellness challenge, or wanting to offer nutritional and fitness information to your workforce, we can help. Contact your EASE@Work Account Manager for more detail on these EAP offerings.

Q: Our organization fully endorses the EAP, and I believe all of our supervisors and managers do, too. Still, I think many of us have unacknowledged biases against employees who admit to personal problems. How can supervisors change these biases?

A: Biases may exist, but they do not have to interfere with management decisions and supervisory practices. Avoid action on biases by recognizing you are in control of what you say and do. By doing this, you will soon acquire an affirming attitude toward employees who step forward to tackle personal problems. Additionally, examine whether unwritten “laws” exists about how employees with personal problems are treated in regard to promotions, raises, discipline, and rewards. Failure to take this step will send the message—in small and subtle ways—that employees with personal problems are not in the organization’s good graces and that they will never achieve the success they might have had if they had not sought help from the EAP.

Happy Holidays from the EASE@WORK staff!