



Office Fatigue a Sign of the Times

In a recent statement, Thomas J. Balkin, vice chair of the National Sleep Foundation (NSF), said: "Studies show fatigue creates long-lasting changes to one's ability to think and function well during the work day."

According to the same study, prolonged workdays are causing many workers to fall asleep or feel sleepy at work. The report points out that Americans are working more hours and trying to cope with the resulting sleepiness. Astonishingly, 63 percent of those polled stated they simply accept this sleepiness, and just keep going. Unfortunately, where many of these workers are heading is the emergency room.

The ramifications of a sputtering economy are that many companies have cut their workforce to stay afloat. Those left to tow the line are now working longer hours and, in some cases, performing duties unfamiliar to them without adequate training. Toss in the stress related with wondering if they will also lose their job, and a lethal combination of fear and fatigue and the result is rising Workers' Compensation claims.

Take this example. One manufacturing company with little history of injury claims, perhaps only five per year at the most, has seen in the past year a dramatic rise in the number of injuries, to as many as 15 to 20, resulting from lacerations, back sprains, broken ankles and so forth. The employer is confused by the increase in injuries, explaining that one of the injured "is such a good worker."

But performance isn't the issue. The human body is a machine with limitations. And what that employer may fail to realize is that his "good worker" is now going from a 40-hour week to a 72-hour week because there are fewer bodies on the floor to meet production demands. His employees are tired, fatigued, not moving as fast, and feeling more stress. It's a connect-the-dots to the next Workers' Compensation claim.

However, there are simple ways employers can help fight the fatigue factor, keep employees safe, and not affect their insurance premiums:

1. Rotate workers frequently during their shifts. Workers who do the same task for hours on end tend to become fatigued and complacent. A change of environment may be a key step in rejuvenating their interest and attention in the work they are doing.

2. Initiate longer break periods. Instead of 15- or 30-minute breaks, give an hour break. Some companies even provide an area where workers can take a nap. It may seem like a long time for a worker to be "off the job," but it's a lot shorter than the time spent on disability leave.

3. Use split shifts. Instead of having a worker do a straight 16-hour shift, let them work eight, go home and rest for six, then come back and do the last eight hours. Time away from the job can be extremely beneficial.

4. Provide food. Refueling is key, and the \$50 spent to have fruit and maybe even a pizza available for those working longer shifts is a good investment compared to the costly consequences associated with a prolonged disability.

5. Stretch or exercise. Most employees feel tired during the day because their muscles remain in relatively the same position and the oxygen levels decrease. Sometimes just some simple stretching or a short 10-minute walk can help rejuvenate the body, which will keep the muscles limber and help avoid injury or strain. Providing posters with simple stretches provided by a local therapist could also help avoid the strain of a long day.

Fatigue and long hours in the workplace are serious issues. In its investigation of the causes of the BP Texas City oil refinery explosion in 2005, in which 15 workers were killed and approximately 170 injured, the U.S. Chemical Safety Board cited worker fatigue and long work hours as likely contributing factors to the explosion.

It's unrealistic to think that employers will suddenly restock their workforce overnight. The times are such that workplaces will remain lean and in some cases two people are doing the work once done by four.

So be proactive in your precautions. Implementing these simple steps could go a long way in keeping productivity up and injury claims down. And with companies still cutting back, can you really afford to lose another employee?

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