



De-Stress for Success!



Marichen Mortimer argues that stress management is a critical component of strategy design, especially in the field of Human Capital.

Stress in the workplace has become a common phenomenon, now more so than ever. While technology has made aspects of many jobs easier, it has also added to the anxieties of work life through information overload, heightened pressure for productivity and a threatening sense of impermanence in the workplace. The World Health Organisation labelled stress a 'worldwide epidemic' in 1996. Workplace stress has been estimated to cost American companies more than \$300bn a year in poor performance, absenteeism and health costs. In Britain the workplace costs related to stress were calculated at £26bn. Closer to home, in South Africa our cost of absenteeism was estimated at R19.14bn (as per CAM Solutions).

Globally, workplace stress is on the increase. A 2010 Grant Thornton study indicated that 56% of the world's private business owners believed that stress in the office had increased in the past year. A 2009 SA survey found that the impact on absenteeism of job stress and organisational commitment was significant. (Pienaar et al.)

Workplace stress occurs when:

- Individuals struggle to adjust to a rapid and continuously changing work environment,
- The work challenges and demands become excessive to that which the individual can handle,
- The pressures of the workplace surpass workers' abilities to deal with them,
- Employees find it difficult to cope with the uncertainty created by the sense of impermanence with respect to job security.

When stress changes from normal to excessive, it can trigger mental, physical and emotional responses that are harmful to employees and, consequently, to businesses.

An interesting research finding regarding the impact of workplace stress in SA is that between 30%-50% of stressors in the workplace convert to stress-related ill health via burnout which, in return, results in 2.2 times more healthcare claims compared to those employees who experience low job stress. (Pienaar, J.; Mostert, K.; Rothmann, S (Jnr); & Rothmann, J.C.2010)

In the American Journal of Epidemiology (May 2009) high job strain as a result of work climate stressors was reported to be the strongest factor for the risk of depression. Employees with high job strain were four times more likely to have depressive symptoms and 70% more likely to score in the 'clinically depressed' category. These results showed that programmes which targeted the reduction of job strain may significantly reduce the risk of depression and overall improve mental health.

The effects of high levels of stress:

- Sub-optimum customer service and relationships,
- Increased turnover of personnel resulting in the loss of skills and corporate memory,
- Higher levels of absenteeism,
- Increased risk of dysfunctional behaviour between employees,
- Lack of concentration and focus,
- Increased occupational health and safety risks.

Towards relaxation...

Most people think that relaxation is simple, yet, except for the scientists, very few truly understand what relaxation means. When you are tired you go to bed thinking that is relaxation. However, unless you are free from muscular, mental and emotional tensions, you are never relaxed. Despite a superficial sense of wellbeing, most people are full of tensions most of the time. They habitually bite their nails, scratch their head, stroke their chin, tap their feet, pace about restlessly, talk compulsively, display irritability or chain-smoke. People do these things because they lack awareness of their own inner tension. They may think that they are relaxed, but a closer look reveals that they are not. Even while sleeping, thoughts and worries revolve in the mind, so that the person wakes up feeling exhausted. In order to relax completely the inner tensions of the body, mind and emotions must be released. People do not do this

naturally and often need to be taught an understanding of their stresses and how to relax.

Developing a Wellness strategy

Against this background, corporate human capital strategy needs to include an overall wellness component. Stress management interventions are a key component of the wellness strategy.



Wellness

- Stress management
- Weight management
- Smoking cessation
- HIV/Aids programmes, etc.

Stress in the workplace influences individual and company performance. Stress is a medically proven physical reality, not just an abstract concept. An effective stress management programme should address the three main levels of stress, namely: mental, emotional and muscular.

Mental tensions are the result of excessive mental activity which results in a whirlpool of accumulated information. This in turn results in an overactive mind and often a feeling of being overwhelmed.

Emotional tensions, which stem from various dualities such as success or failure, happiness or unhappiness, are more difficult to erase. This is because people often find it difficult to express their emotions which then become repressed, further resulting in tensions becoming more and more deeply rooted. A stress management programme sets the process in motion to start the relaxation of the mind and thus allowing these tensions to subside.

Muscular tensions are related to the effect on the body itself, for example the nervous system and the endocrine system, leading to possible imbalances.

The negative effects of suppressed stress lead to physical, mental and emotional dysfunctions – namely:

- Chronic fatigue syndrome burn-out,
- Exhaustion, lethargy and mental disorders,
- Immune deficiencies, reoccurring infections,
- Eating disorders, obesity, duodenal and stomach ulcers,
- Disturbance of heart rhythm and hypertension, heart attacks,
- Drug dependency, alcoholism and depression,
- Insomnia, eczema and psoriasis.

Wellness solutions where individuals understand how to manage their stress, hold multiple benefits – to list but a few:

- Higher productivity and efficiency,
- Better attendance, alertness and increased concentration (focus on work),
- Increased levels of motivation, job satisfaction, innovation and creativity,
- Quicker achievement of set goals and targets,
- Improved loyalty and relationships with management,
- It promotes verbal communication, lowers depression and anxiety,
- Measurable decrease in sick-leave days, reduced absence due to headaches and migraines, colds, flu, etc.

The effectiveness of stress management programmes should be linked to return on investment. This should be reflected by hours gained or lost due to concentration or lack thereof and improvement on or increase of absenteeism.

What happens in practice?

Two South African companies illustrate the benefits of in-depth wellness programmes. These consisted mainly of one-on-one coaching, group sessions (where the content focused on self-leadership skills and relaxation techniques) and wellness assessment questionnaires before and after the intervention.

In Momentum, a sample of 59 participants ranging from managerial to call-centre level participated in a programme that spanned six weeks. The potential savings that resulted from an improvement in focus, concentration and overall wellbeing of the participants, were calculated from the results and projected at an annual amount of R 3.642m.

In BMW, a sample of 29 customer-service specialists participated in the programme. The resultant annual saving was calculated to be R 3.4m.

The stress levels of the participants, as measured during the programme, decreased substantially, as the participants were enabled to adjust their mindset where relevant, and thus altered their approach to managing their day-to-day challenges. The participants also reported an overall improvement in their general sense of wellbeing as a result of applying the self-leadership skills and the relaxation techniques.

Directors need to ensure that the organisation monitors the effectiveness of the wellness programmes to ensure that staff turnover and wellbeing result in minimal financial losses and actually start to add value for financial gains and to contribute to the organisation's long-term profitability and sustainability.

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