

Health And Safety At Work By Dr. Jennifer Newman & Dr. Darryl Grigg

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Too often people get hurt at work. Physical injury can range from the minor - repetitive strain injury, to moderate - muscle strain and back pain from lifting - to death, as we have sadly seen too often in B.C.'s forests. Staff can also suffer from psychological injury due to unresolved conflict, harassment or bullying.

Whether the injury is physical or psychological, employees and their families can bear the scars.

Yet, sometimes companies pay little attention to health and safety. Employers may rush dangerous jobs to get their returns quickly. They may, fail to provide training, or allow toxic interpersonal environments to fester.

Staff too can neglect their and co-workers' well being. Senior staff might give new recruits the idea that dangerous behaviour will win them acceptance. Protocols such as the wearing of eye goggles or helmets could be ignored. And an “it-can't-happen-to-me” mentality could put staff at risk.

The American Psychological Association cites ensuring worker health and safety along with promoting staff involvement, training and development, employee recognition and work-life balance as hallmarks of a psychologically healthy organization.

In this column (the last in our five-part series on the factors that comprise psychologically healthy workplaces) we focus on worker health and safety. Psychologically healthy workplaces put a premium on worker safety and wellbeing and are rewarded for their diligence with reduced absenteeism, lower injury rates, reduced costs and lost time due to injury. Plus, workers are more productive and experience higher morale when cared for by the company.

There are three ways organizations ensure worker health and safety:

1. Provide Injury Prevention Programs and Policies

Companies that care about employee wellbeing believe that the workplace should be safe and that it's their duty to make sure employees return home uninjured at the end of the day. This means providing programs that prevent both physical and psychological injury. Ensuring that you have an up-to-date harassment policy, for example, is key to handling issues that create toxic offices. Do people know what to do if they are harassed, do they know what harassment is and are they trained to deal with the problem if it arises? Does the company maintain an attitude that signals zero tolerance for harassment?

Similarly, does the company provide ongoing safety training and extra help with physically dangerous activities? Some organizations conduct dry-run simulations before employees perform a dangerous task. They add an extra person to monitor the safety of the activity and pair new recruits with more experienced staff. These kinds of programs work well to prevent injury and go beyond relying solely on safety posters or hastily developed and conducted safety training events.

2. Promote Wellness

Companies that offer effective extended health benefits including access to psychological services provide staff with the means to maintain their emotional and interpersonal wellbeing. Providing employees with adequate access to Employee and Family Assistance Programs also helps.

Wellness initiatives that include exercise opportunities, stress-reduction and nutritional information keep the workforce healthy. Programs that promote medical health including on-line health assessments, cholesterol and diabetes screening and smoking cessation programs are important to overall staff well being. Programs like these indicate to staff that they matter and are valued by the company.

3. Invite Involvement

Companies that involve employees in joint management and union safety committees and seek staff input regarding creating and maintaining safety standards as well as identifying hazardous work areas, conditions or behaviours, reap the rewards. Encouraging workers to look out for each other's safety and keeping safety consciousness uppermost in people's minds can help. Asking employees about their sense of psychological safety at work, the adequacy of the harassment, diversity and equality policies and procedures, as well as obtaining feedback about management attitudes towards the same, is important.

Offering employees an opportunity to control their environment is key especially when people can influence the light, noise and air quality in the work place. Providing chances to increase ventilation, alter the temperature or obtain cleaning services can make a workplace more pleasant and less stressful. Working in an overly warm office or in an environment that is too cold takes its toll on personnel. It is helpful to provide staff the means to control or alter their environment rather than find the perfect temperature, light fixture or ventilation system. Having as much control over one's environment is important to psychological wellbeing.

Your company may engage in health and safety practices that make you feel safe, valued and important. If this is the case, you may want to nominate your company for the Psychologically Healthy Workplace Award. Please contact us for an application form. The deadline for applications is January 31st, 2007 and the awards will be made in June 2007.

The Psychologically Healthy Workplace Award is sponsored by WorkSafe BC, Vancouver International Airport Authority, Industrial Alliance Pacific Life Insurance Company, the American Psychological Association, the British Columbia Psychological Association, Bruyneel & Co., MinuteMan Press(Burrard at 8th Avenue), The UPS Store (Yaletown), BC Human Resources Management Association and Health, Work & Wellness.
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