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Finding a balance

Cost of stress hits employers' bottom line

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'Tis the season for shopping lists, end-of-year reports and far more social engagements than you could possibly attend.

If you are feeling stressed, you are not alone. According to a Gallup poll, 80 percent of workers said they felt stress on the job, and nearly half said they needed help learning how to manage that stress. About 40 percent said their coworkers needed help coping with stress.

No wonder employers are taking a closer look at how to reduce workers' stress, a problem experts estimate costs companies \$200 billion to \$300 billion a year in lost productivity and absenteeism. And that doesn't include the effect grumpy employees can have on customers and each other.

"They look at the bottom line," said Chris Habgood, director of public policy for the Mental Health Association of Colorado. "Many businesses see if they prevent some of the stress ... they basically find better productivity."

In many ways, stress is a daily part of life. Cell phones, laptops, pagers -- not to mention an economy that is demanding more for less -- have plugged employees into their jobs in ways they weren't several years ago. But employers are concerned about stress because it can lead to big problems: illness -- stress is linked to six leading causes of death, including heart disease and cancer -- injury, absenteeism, turnover and diminished productivity. All of that can increase medical and workers' compensation costs and employee turnover.

About 1 million U.S. employees miss work each day because of workplace stress, according to the Mental Health Association of Colorado.

The strategies Colorado employers are using for reducing stress vary as widely as the companies themselves. They range from counseling to meditation and yoga classes to measuring stress levels through employees' computer mouse and teaching them how to relax when levels are too high. Some have achieved measurable results.

Employees at Turner Public Relations in Denver take yoga classes. The firm employs 10 people locally, and anywhere from two to six employees will attend, said Christine Turner, president and CEO.

"We even had at one point a woman come into our office and teach a class on breathing," she said. "Working out ... on a regular basis definitely helps with people's stress levels."

Turner said she also makes a point of keeping a close tab on people's workload, meeting twice a week with employees to discuss deadlines and current projects.

The firm represents real estate, luxury travel and fashion and footwear companies. While the travel and real estate business remains pretty constant, Turner said, the firm is particularly busy in the fall and spring when fashion companies launch their collections.

But employees work in teams, with two to four people on one account, so work can be shifted to even the load.

"That's why communication is so key in our business," Turner said. "We encourage communication so if anybody has too much ... I can help them prioritize."

Managers can be key in reducing stress for workers, said Marcia Kent, vice president of organizational psychology for Mines & Associates in Littleton, which analyzes work flow in companies and helps employers with employee assistance and other programs. Some of the most innovative programs tie managers' compensation to their ability to help employees manage stress, she

said.

Managers can also help restructure work flow to eliminate duplicative tasks, which can also add to workers' stress. For example, Mines & Associates helped a call center streamline their processes.

"They are well intended, but sometimes the employer isn't always getting the result they are looking for," Kent said. "We want to identify what the stressors are at the individual level."

Centura Health, the state's largest hospital system, has a meditation room at its corporate office where employees can pray or take a break. The room is filled with lots of windows and natural light, as well as prayer and spiritual books and other items designed to encourage reflection. Relaxing music plays in the background. Centura also has optional prayer group meetings and a prayer chain via e-mail.

"Our associates are our greatest asset," said spokeswoman Dana Berry. "Through meditation, associates are able to take a moment to breathe and draw away from others, to focus and clear their head."

Boeing and the city of Fort Collins are among the employers testing a new device from Logisens Corp. in Fort Collins that measures stress levels through a computer mouse.

A sensor measures moisture on the skin -- an indicator of stress. If levels get too high, a prompt on the computer screen instructs employees to take three deep breaths, play a biofeedback game that encourages relaxation or do some stretching. It provides immediate feedback to employees, allowing them to see which tasks increase their stress levels and what techniques help reduce them. Software allows employees to track their progress over time.

Logisens measured the effects of the product on 23 people who work for the city of Fort Collins. Employees reported a 22 percent reduction in burnout, a 44 percent decrease in work stress and a 15 percent increase in life and job satisfaction.

One user in Sheboygan, Wis., said it helped "by reminding me not to blow things out of proportion."

That kind of help is important because illness and lost productivity from stress costs businesses big bucks, said Bill Van Eron, chief marketing officer of Logisens.

"What this does is it teaches you to relax," Van Eron said. "It trains you how to be mentally focused and reach your optimal level."

Who doesn't have that on their Christmas list?