

TRENDS



By Jennifer J. Salopek

An ounce
of prevention

Job Stress

Although workplace stress, unfortunately, isn't a trend, its popularity as a topic in the popular and business press waxes and wanes. Job stress was brought to the fore of public consciousness again recently with the publication of a front-page, three-part series in the *New York Times*. Those articles focused primarily on the serious health problems that can arise from severe, long-term job stress and profiled several people who left the rat race because of its deleterious effects on their health. Those are extreme cases, but workplace stress is a very real phenomenon that can have very real effects on sufferers and on business. What's changing are the ways in which job stress is treated, with a new focus on prevention.

**"We're from the government,
and we're here to help you."**

Job stress has been around as long as there have been jobs. Can you imagine how stressful it might have been to work as a courtier to the imperious Cleopatra or the mercurial Louis XIV? What about working as an oarsman on one of those enormous Viking ships? Wouldn't "explorer" be a stressful occupation?

Historic documents in the United States record field studies on varied working hours in different industries as early as the 1800s—perhaps the earliest known job-stress research in this country. Researchers have studied the effects of work organization on health since the turn of the century; growing industrialization spawned a movement in human relations that evaluated

work's effects on worker satisfaction and well-being.

Since 1971, one government organization in particular—the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—has been the primary public conductor and funder of research on job stress, among other things. Steven Sauter is chief of the Organizational Science and Human Factors Branch, which deals with "a broad array of issues that relate to psychological factors in the workplace," he says.

Sauter cites a defining moment for public awareness of job stress: In the 1980s, the NIOSH director at the time created an initiative to identify the 10 leading hazards to occupational safety and health. Psychological disorders was one of the 10.

"This was a watershed event," says Sauter. "It created quite a stir, but eventually the reality of job stress became well accepted. Since then, it has been an exponentially growing focus for researchers."

NIOSH, in partnership with the American Psychological Association, sponsored its first conference on workplace stress in 1990. What was expected to be a small working conference instead drew several hundred attendees. The next conference, *Work Stress and Health: Making a Difference in the Workplace*, is scheduled for March 2006 in Miami and is likely to attract a thousand participants. Proposed topics for presentations run the gamut from Lean Production and Downsizing, to Employee Assistance Programs, to Workplace Violence.

Attitudes, practical remedies

Approaches to, and goals for, NIOSH's research into workplace stress have changed over the past two and a half decades. Sauter, who has been at NIOSH since the mid-1980s, notes, "Attention in the 1970s and 1980s focused on job factors and health—the critical aspects of the work experience that create risk for stress and illness. There was much less attention paid to safety. In the late 1980s, awareness increased that the organization of work in this country was changing; there were new types of employment contracts, new production processes, downsizing, and decreased job security, among other things. Further, the link between job stress and negative health effects has grown steadily since the late 1980s, and has drawn greater attention."

In recent years, NIOSH has emphasized "research into practice"—helping to find practical solutions to the problems its researchers are studying. To that end, NIOSH provided seed funding to 11 major universities to create programs to train researchers and practitioners in the field, and provided permanent funding to two universities to create and maintain enduring graduate training programs. "It is clear that NIOSH recognizes this as an important area," Sauter says.

In 1999, NIOSH published its seminal booklet, "Stress at Work," which outlines the causes and effects of job stress and suggests solutions for both prevention and remediation. Its publication signaled another sea change in the field, as NIOSH took the official position that workplace stress is an organizational problem that is created by poor job design and can be remedied by job redesign, rather than an individual problem caused by poor coping mechanisms. All the stress management workshops in the world, therefore, are not going to reduce the stress created by

poor job design. As the narrator of NIOSH's 2002 video notes, "Nearly half of all large companies provide some kind of stress management training to their employees. These programs are beneficial in the short term, but don't address the root causes of stress." That marks a shift in focus from the worker to the work environment.

NIOSH defines job stress as "the harmful physical and psychological responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker." In other words, working conditions play a primary role in causing job stress. Measurements of the extent of the problem vary: The Families and Work Institute reports that 26 percent of workers say they are "often or very often burned out or stressed out by their work." The Bureau of Labor Statistics puts the figure as high as 33 percent. Whatever the dimensions, NIOSH researchers have identified these characteristics of jobs that can lead to stress:

The design of tasks. Heavy workload, infrequent rest breaks, long work hours, and shiftwork; hectic and routine tasks that have little inherent meaning, don't utilize workers' skills, and provide little sense of control.

Management style. Lack of participation by workers in decision making, poor communication in the organization, lack of family-friendly policies.

Interpersonal relationships. Poor social environment and lack of support or help from co-workers and supervisors.

Work roles. Conflicting or uncertain job expectations; too much responsibility; too many "hats to wear."

Career concerns. Job insecurity; lack of opportunity for growth, advancement, or promotion; rapid changes for which workers are unprepared.

Environmental conditions. Unpleasant or dangerous physical conditions such as crowding, noise, air pollution, or ergonomic problems.

By the way, NIOSH regards stress as "strictly an adverse condition," according to Sauter; those things that can have a positive effect are called *challenges*.

Why should employers care?

Although comprehensive costs are difficult to measure across industry, there's no doubt that job stress has a negative effect on productivity as it results in absenteeism, health care claims, and turnover. The American Institute of Stress estimates that "workplace stress costs the nation more than US\$300 billion each year in health-care, missed work, and the stress-reduction industry that has grown up to soothe workers and keep production high," reports the *New York Times*. Sauter says that workers who report that they are stressed incur health-care costs that are 46 percent higher than other employees. (Stress has been shown to contribute to increased cardiovascular disease, psychological disorders, musculoskeletal disorders, and increased susceptibility to hazards and accidents. The average absence due to a stress disorder is 20 days.)

"Business leaders recognize that the work environment is different," says Sauter. "They're concerned—about the welfare of the workforce, about losing high-quality workers, and about costs."

A 2003 survey by *Personnel Today* magazine of bosses in the United Kingdom found that more than half of employers believe that workers who complain of stress are usually faking it. Sauter admits that the business leaders who contact him and NIOSH for assistance clearly don't scoff at the phenomenon; he doesn't know what percentage of American managers may still downplay workplace stress as a personal weakness or convenient excuse.

For those businesses that do recognize the seriousness of the issue, however, there are several constructive steps they can take:

- Build general awareness about job stress within the organization.
- Secure top management commitment and support for the program.
- Establish the technical capacity to conduct the program, such as specialized training for in-house staff or the retention of consultants.
- Identify stressors. Evaluate working conditions, stress levels, health concerns, and job satisfaction.
- Design and implement solutions. Characteristics of “healthy” organizations include recognition of employees for good work performance, opportunities for career development, an organizational culture that values the individual worker, and management actions that are consistent with organizational values.
- Evaluate progress regularly, then refine the solutions in a continuous improvement process.

NIOSH’s experts also stress that it is crucial to incorporate employee input and involvement in all phases of the program.

The “Stress at Work” booklet on the NIOSH Website continues to receive around 90,000 hits annually—a clear indication that the issue is an ongoing concern for employers and employees alike. Aside from redesigning work to reduce stress in their own workplaces, business leaders can also help NIOSH and other researchers address the gaps in their work: “We must improve the quality and quantity of our research, especially on long work hours, organizational restructuring and downsizing, and new production practices,” says Sauter. “Although there has clearly been a response in the research community to these issues, we are dependent on the cooperation of industry and business leaders to conduct further research.

“Although we currently lack the resources to educate business fully,”

he continues, “there is a significant body of research on occupational risk factors for workplace stress. The knowledge exists to do something about it. The research and business communities need to take

every possible opportunity to come together.”

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