The Opinion Pages

How Stressful Work Environments Hurt Workers’ Health

By Teresa Tritch  August 25, 2015 5:14 pm

A lot of people would not work in a place where co-workers smoke. And most people will never be faced with that decision because smoking is typically banned in the workplace on the sensible ground that secondhand smoke is dangerous to everyone.

Should long and unpredictable hours, excessive job demands, capricious management and other aspects of the modern workplace be banned on the same ground?

That is the question raised by a new study from researchers at Stanford and Harvard, who found that workplace stress is about as dangerous to one’s health as secondhand smoke.

The study, published recently in the peer-reviewed journal Behavioral Science & Policy, examined 10 workplace conditions. Five were presumed to harm health: long working hours; shift work; work-family conflict; high job demands; and low job control, which refers to the level of discretion employees have over their work. Another four were presumed to mitigate those stressors: social support; social networking opportunities; availability of employer-provided health care and organizational justice, defined as the perceived fairness of a workplace.
The last workplace condition, and arguably the most important, was whether the person was employed at all. The researchers acknowledged that employers are not responsible for macro-economic forces that influence unemployment. But, they noted, employers are responsible for decisions about layoffs, which increase economic insecurity even among workers who keep their jobs.

The researchers calculated the effects of each of the 10 conditions on four health outcomes: self-rated poor health; self-rated poor mental health; physician-diagnosed health problems and death.

Among the findings:

• Work-family conflict more than doubled the odds of an employee reporting poor mental health and increased the odds of self-reported poor physical health by about 90 percent.
• Job insecurity raised the odds of self-reported poor physical health by about 50 percent.
• Low organizational justice increased the odds of having a physician-diagnosed condition by about 50 percent.
• High job demands raised the odds of a physician-diagnosed illness by 35 percent.
• Long work hours increased mortality by nearly 20 percent.

In addition, unemployment and low job control significantly upped the odds of all of the outcomes, while adverse psycho-social situations at work – lack of fairness, low social support and low job control – were as strongly associated with poor health as concrete factors like long hours and shift work.

In all, the researchers calculated that workplace stress contributes to at least 120,000 deaths each year – comparable to the annual number of accidental deaths in the United States – and accounts for up to $190 billion in health care costs.
The researchers give many reasons that employers should care. If the
human right to health does not resonate, employers have a bottom line
interest in a healthy workforce. Better health is associated with greater
productivity. Better health would presumably lower the costs for employer-
provided health insurance and health-care related taxes.

The study, however, ends on a cautionary note: “Unless and until
companies and governments more rigorously measure and intervene to reduce
harmful workplace stressors, efforts to improve people’s health — and their
lives — and reduce health care costs will be limited in their effectiveness.”

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