



Reducing stress in the workplace

Although many organisations today are putting staff under pressure to improve the bottom line, they also have an eye on employee retention in this tight labour market. **Teresa Russell** looks at how organisations focus on corporate wellness to reduce stress in the workplace

Although a certain level of stress helps us all get our jobs done, gives us energy and a positive experience of our abilities, too much stress can have disastrous ramifications for some individuals.

According to information provided by Australian government initiative JobAccess: "too much stress can distort our ability to plan and do our job well, gets in the way of good communication, reduces our belief in our abilities and can cause depression and other mental illnesses."

For many decades, organisations have counted the cost of high stress in the workforce through high absenteeism, low productivity and high disability rates, increased insurance premiums and high staff turnover. Stress reduction strategies come in all shapes and sizes and include employee assistance programs, mental wellness forums, physical exercise and diet.

Dr John Lang from Good Health Solutions says that managing stress is one of the four pillars of

good health. (The others are to eat well, keep fit and not smoke).

At Cerebos Australia, stress management is just one part of a suite of topics and themes covered in its Mastering Life program, a half to full-day workshop available to all 430 employees across the organisation. Cerebos is an FMCG company with manufacturing plants in Sydney and Melbourne, as well as a large sales and marketing operation that manages the Fountain, Gravox, Saxa and Riva brands.

"I wouldn't presume to know participants so well that I could choose the best stress management topic for each of them," says Roxanne Walker, organisation and employee development manager at Cerebos.

She says that stress and managing your workload is a valuable topic that covers a range of strategies, from walking more and using pedometers to attending stress management courses. "Each person takes

away from the day what they need. I don't have to be directive about that," she says.

Vanessa Bourke, HR advisor at City of Sydney, says the organisation's OHS team introduced a wide-ranging corporate wellness program about 18 months ago to encourage people to become active for their health's sake. "Although we don't run a specific stress management program, we do look at how we can reduce the amount of stress felt by making people healthier and making them more conscious of their own health and well-being," she says.

City of Sydney is a local government authority covering Sydney's CBD, reaching south to Alexandria, west to Glebe and east to Paddington. Following a merger with South Sydney Council in 2004, the election of the new Lord Mayor, Clover Moore MP, and a change of CEO two years ago, Bourke says the organisation has become a lot more community-focussed. Its 1700 employees, comprising about 100 occupations, operate out of 40 different locations throughout the local government area.

Introducing the program

Six years ago, 25 senior Cerebos managers and emerging leaders were the first participants in its Mastering Life program. Walker says that thanks to its high profile in the media, the issues of stress and work/life balance had employees asking for something that catered to their personal needs.



“Mastering Life is a program that focuses on the whole person – including their physical, mental and emotional environment. It gives people the information they need to set themselves up for success,” says Walker. Following the success of the original program, Cerebos has offered it once or twice a year ever since.

Walker says it is important to take care about the way you brand a corporate wellness program. “Be careful about naming it a stress management program. Don’t pre-suppose anything. Often the people who are the most stressed are not talking about it anyway. They may benefit from talking to a professional through a company’s EAP (employee assistance program),” she says.

At City of Sydney, the organisation started by introducing corporate health assessments for all staff about two years ago. About 50 per cent of all staff took up the offer to have their blood pressure monitored and to discuss their exercise and eating habits, among other things.

A large range of programs has since followed, including 10-week rotations of pilates, boxercise and yoga at different depots; a series of workshops demonstrating how to prepare easy, economical and healthy recipes; men’s and women’s health seminars; neck and shoulder massages; introducing a “health mates agreement” in which one worker agrees to help another achieve their health goals; and participating in the 10,000 steps global corporate challenge.

At each location, City of Sydney identified key people who championed the various programs and managed them for their particular site.

Bourke says variety is important. “Not everyone wants to do pilates or yoga. Some people just want information and to think about how they could incorporate changes into their lives,” she says, adding that creating a non-threatening environment, both in HR and in the program, is vital to its success.

“We get our providers to put information into sample bags, so our employees don’t have to pick up sensitive information brochures off a table in front of their colleagues,” says Bourke.

Measuring results

Walker says that Cerebos uses standard level -two Kirkpatrick evaluation surveys at the end of each Mastering Life program, but that the other reflection of its success is when managers refer others to the program.

program.

“We have noted specific behaviour changes in certain employees. For example, some people lost 10kgs after the first program, another stopped smoking and a third asked to be referred to our EAP,” says Walker, who found the stress management review “excellent,”

resulting in her increasing the amount of exercise she was doing at the time.

Because the programs are optional, Bourke considers participation to be one of the measures of a program’s success. Fifty people participated in the 10,000 steps Global Corporate Challenge last year, while 180 have signed up this year.

Also, 97 men and 110 women attended the health seminars for their gender – a result deemed successful because it was anticipated before the seminars were held that the men may not have had as high participation rates.

City of Sydney also conducts evaluation surveys, face-to-face and focus group feedback to determine what employees get out of a program. “Although absenteeism rates have improved, the main benefits have been more around feeling good, getting involved in more activities and employees feeling positive about where they work,” says Bourke, who adds that they are just starting to look at ROI after the second year of the program.

“We have been more focussed on celebrating the fact that our staff have been receiving all these things. Now we are focussing on understanding how these initiatives are giving us a competitive advantage and contributing to City of Sydney becoming an employer of choice,” says Bourke.

Tips for success

Bourke says that corporate wellness programs must add value to an organisation’s corporate strategies and must be widely promoted. She advocates continually improving programs by listening to the feedback from participants.

“Never mandate a program or be too directive. Make sure your facilitator is a credible expert who

provides up-to-date quality information and can walk the talk,” says Walker.

Both Cerebos and City of Sydney strongly advocate ensuring a suite of programs is offered to accommodate the needs of a wide variety of people. “If they walk away with one health tip to add to their life, then that is a win for us,” concludes Bourke.



Vendor news

BodyCare Corporate Injury Management is the largest provider of on-site physiotherapy services throughout Australia, offering tailored solutions to employers to effectively reduce the cost of injuries in the workplace. Their specialised services aim to bridge the gap between employees and employers by promoting injury prevention through interactive education, treatment and consultation with both employees and occupational health and safety staff. BodyCare's on-site process effectively changes the culture of workplace injuries, which ultimately leads to a more proactive workplace environment. For further information contact Anita Stacey, Business Development, on (03) 96452183 or 0424003491, anitastacey@bodycare.com.au or visit www.bodycare.com.au

Peak Health Management is Australia's leading corporate health services company. PEAK's boutique, customised, quality and results-focused approach has seen the company acknowledged as "the best in the business". Both ISO9001 Quality certified and pathology accredited, PEAK's suite of onsite and offsite services and programs encompass: corporate medical services, health promotions, health screening, executive health management, corporate gymnasiums, health profiling and associated IT solutions. PEAK's proven, extensive logistical infrastructure allows the company to accommodate both single and multi-site organisations. For more information call 1300 360 107 or visit www.peakhealth.com.au

Symptoms of stress

There are a number of factors that can make you feel stressed at work, including:

- poor working conditions
- long working hours
- relationships with colleagues
- lack of job security
- difficult journeys to and from work
- the way the company is managed
- mismatch between the requirements of the job and your own capabilities and needs
- inflexible working hours
- too much or too little responsibility

Work-related stress can cause both physical and emotional health problems. It can cause you to be more prone to physical symptoms such as:

- headaches
- muscular tension
- backache and/or neck ache
- tiredness and sleep problems
- digestive problems
- a raised heart rate
- skin rashes
- sweating
- blurred vision

Source: Bupa UK Fact Sheet

