

Reducing workload to increase productivity

Written by

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While corporate social responsibility (CSR) is often used in reference to the company's interaction with external stakeholders, the first step is to look inwards and ensure that employees of the company are valued and treated with respect. A company's first responsibility is safeguard the health, safety and welfare of employees. However, many companies regard it as a human resource (HR) issue of little business importance. In today's fast-paced, multi-tasking, electronically and digitally-enhanced world, employees are expected to be overly productive and deliver effectively around the clock. Heavy workloads of prolonged duration, protracted overtime with little opportunity for recuperation, and a fast working pace can be detrimental to the health and productivity of even the most durable employee.

The mentioned circumstances can lead to emotional, mental, physical and psychological exhaustion. All these are primary symptoms of burnout, usually caused by excessive and prolonged stress. As stress continues to escalate, employees lose interest and motivation. Consequently, employees' productivity level declines and produces work that does not live up to the employer's demanding expectations.

Companies must realise that there is a business case in ensuring their HR department looks after their employee's wellbeing. An analysis of FTSE 100 employers by Business in the Community (BITC) found that companies which took active steps to improve health and wellbeing at work enhanced financial performance by 10% on average in 2009.

While a complex issue to address, there are a few simple ways to start ensuring a healthy and productive work environment that diminishes the risk of employee burnout. Although ironically, the ways suggested for increased work productivity initiates through decreasing employees' activities.

1. Switching off the email function on BlackBerrys

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We can perhaps learn from a recent move by Volkswagen (VW), Europe's biggest car maker to ban transmission of work emails to employees' smartphones. The phones will remain usable for calls, but the VW server will not send emails 30 minutes after the end of their shift until 30 minutes before work begins the next day. This is a rather bold move although it will allow more than 1,100 VWs employees get good quality night sleep with no work related email intrusion on their BlackBerrys.

2. Take regular short breaks

It may be a boost to productivity in the short term to work non-stop and without taking breaks. In the long run it is counterproductive. Employers have a responsibility to constantly remind themselves and their employees that their body is designed to alternate work and rest. Just like an engine, working non-stop will only cause a break down. Breaks are essential to fight fatigue, stress, exhaustion and regain one's energy and concentration.

3. Reduce multitasking task

Employers may presumptuously think that multitasking amongst employees should be encouraged as it leads to more productivity. After all, multitasking means performing two or more tasks simultaneously. So more work can be done in that same period, right? US research has found that multitasking reduces productivity rather than increases it. Multitasking means loss of valuable time due to switching between tasks. Employers need to note that it is costing their company as much as 20 to 40 per cent in terms of potential efficiency lost switching between tasks. For optimum productivity, employers should encourage their employees to focus on one thing at a time.

4. Shorten long working hours

Research shows evidence that working long hours regularly is associated with fatigue and this may affect employees' performance and productivity. Here, the Parkinson's Law observes that "work either expands or contracts in order to fill the time available". This just means that through shortening one's work time by allocating deadlines, it causes one to focus on only the most important tasks. Plus, the environment may seem to benefit from it too - with the office buildings powered fewer hours.

Simple steps, but ones which many might find provocative. To conclude with a quote from Management Guru Peter Drucker: "the productivity of work is not the responsibility of the worker but of the manager". Although, the ways suggested may seem like common sense solutions to enhancing employee productivity, it is not necessarily common practice.

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