

Employee Well-being

Key concepts and terms

- Employee assistance programme (EAP)
- Hazard
- Health and safety audit
- Health and safety inspection
- Incidence rate
- Occupational health programme
- Occupational hygiene
- Occupational medicine
- Quality of working life
- Risk
- Risk assessment
- Work environment
- Work–life balance

Learning outcomes

On completing this chapter you should be able to define these key concepts. You should also know about:

- Approaches to achieving the well-being of employees by managing the work environment
- Approaches to achieving a healthy and safe system of work

Introduction

The well-being of employees depends on the quality of working life provided by their employers – the feelings of satisfaction and happiness arising from the work itself, and the work environment, including the provisions made for their health and safety. There are three reasons why organizations should be concerned with the well-being of their employees. First, and most importantly, they have a duty of care, and this means adopting a socially responsible approach to looking after their people. Second, employers need to concentrate on creating a good work environment not only because it is their duty to do so, but also as a means of enhancing organizational engagement. Third, it is in the interests of employers to do so because this will increase the likelihood of their employees being committed to the organization and help to establish it as a ‘best place to work’.

Managing the work environment

The work environment consists of the system of work, the design of jobs, working conditions, and the ways in which people are treated at work by their managers and co-workers. Well-being is achieved when account is taken of the needs of the people concerned, in designing the work system and the jobs in it. Working conditions need to meet health and safety requirements. The way people are treated is a matter of managerial behaviour, achieving work–life balance and dealing with issues such as stress, harassment and bullying (discussed below).

Managerial behaviour

Ed Lawler (2003) suggests that what managers have to do is ‘to treat people right’. This means respecting them as individuals, recognizing their different needs and wants, rewarding their achievements, helping them to develop, and treating them with consideration as human beings.

Work–life balance

Work–life balance employment practices are concerned with providing scope for employees to balance what they do at work with the responsibilities and interests they have outside work. The aim is to reconcile the often competing claims of work and home by meeting the needs of employees as well as those of their employers. As Kodz *et al* (2002) explain, the principle of work–life balance is that ‘There should be a balance between an individual’s work and their life outside work, and that this balance should be healthy.’

The Work Foundation (2003) defined the concept of work–life balance as ‘about employees achieving a satisfactory equilibrium between work and non-work activities (ie parental

responsibilities and wider caring duties, as well as other activities and interests)'. The Work Foundation recommends that practical day-to-day business and related needs should be considered when organizations set about selecting the range of work–life options that should be made available to staff, whether on a collective basis (as for example flexitime arrangements) or on an individual level (say, allowing individuals flexibility to change hours of work during term time).

Individual requests for a particular working arrangement generally need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, but it is important for a culture to exist which does not discourage employees from making such requests. In addition to fearing the reaction of line managers, the risk of career-damage is a common reason for poor take-up of work–life balance arrangements in the form of flexible hours. Line management will need to be convinced that work–life balance measures are important and pay off in terms of increased engagement.

Managing stress

There are four main reasons why organizations should take account of stress and do something about it: first, because they have the social responsibility to provide a good quality of working life; second, because excessive stress causes illness; third, because it can result in inability to cope with the demands of the job, which, of course, creates more stress; and finally because excessive stress can reduce employee effectiveness and therefore organizational performance.

The ways in which stress can be managed by an organization include:

- Job design: clarifying roles, reducing the danger of role ambiguity and conflict, and giving people more autonomy within a defined structure to manage their responsibilities.
- Targets and performance standards: setting reasonable and achievable targets which may stretch people but do not place impossible burdens on them.
- Job placement: taking care to place people in jobs that are within their capabilities.
- Career development: planning careers and promoting staff in accordance with their capabilities, taking care not to over- or under-promote.
- Performance management processes: which allow a dialogue to take place between managers and individuals about the latter's work problems and ambitions.
- Counselling: giving individuals the opportunity to talk about their problems with a member of the HR department, or through an employee assistance programme which provides counselling services to employees.
- Anti-harassment campaigns: harassment is a major cause of stress.
- Anti-bullying campaigns: bullying at work is another major cause of stress.
- Management training in what managers can do to alleviate their own stress and reduce it in others.

Health and safety management

Health and safety policies and programmes are concerned with protecting employees – and other people affected by what the company produces and does – against the hazards arising from their employment or their links with the company.

The elements of health and safety management

Occupational health programmes deal with the prevention of ill-health arising from working conditions. There are two elements:

- *Occupational medicine*, which is a specialized branch of preventive medicine concerned with the diagnosis and prevention of health hazards at work, and dealing with any ill-health or stress that has occurred in spite of preventive actions.
- *Occupational hygiene*, which is the province of the chemist and the engineer or ergonomist engaged in the measurement and control of environmental hazards.

Safety programmes deal with the prevention of accidents and with minimizing the resulting loss and damage to persons and property.

Health and safety policies

Written health and safety policies are required to demonstrate that top management is concerned about the protection of the organization's employees from hazards at work, and to indicate how this protection will be provided. They are therefore first, a declaration of intent, second, a definition of the means by which that intent will be realized, and third, a statement of the guidelines that should be followed by everyone concerned – which means all employees – in implementing the policy.

The policy statement should consist of three parts:

- the general policy statement;
- the description of the organization for health and safety;
- details of arrangements for implementing the policy.

The general policy statement

The general policy statement should be a declaration of the intention of the employer to safeguard the health and safety of employees. It should emphasize four fundamental points:

- that the safety of employees and the public is of paramount importance;
- that safety takes precedence over expediency;

- that every effort will be made to involve all managers, team leaders and employees in the development and implementation of health and safety procedures;
- that health and safety legislation will be complied with in the spirit as well as the letter of the law.

Organization

This section of the policy statement should describe the health and safety organization of the business through which high standards are set and achieved by people at all levels in the organization.

This statement should underline the ultimate responsibility of top management for the health and safety performance of the organization. It should then indicate how key management personnel are held accountable for performance in their areas. The role of safety representatives and safety committees should be defined, and the duties of specialists such as the safety adviser and the medical officer should be summarized.

Conducting risk assessments

Risk assessments are concerned with the identification of hazards and the analysis of the risks attached to them. A hazard is anything that can cause harm (such as working on roofs, lifting heavy objects, handling chemicals, working with electricity). A risk is the chance, large or small, of harm being actually done by the hazard.

The purpose of risk assessments is to initiate preventive action. They enable control measures to be devised on the basis of an understanding of the relative importance of risks. Risk assessments must be recorded if there are five or more employees.

There are two types of risk assessment. Quantitative risk assessment produces an objective probability estimate based upon risk information that is immediately applicable to the circumstances in which the risk occurs. Qualitative risk assessment is more subjective, and is based on judgement backed by generalized data. Qualitative risk assessment is preferable if the specific data are available. Qualitative risk assessment may be acceptable if there is little or no specific data as long as it is made systematically on the basis of an analysis of working conditions and hazards, and informed judgement of the likelihood of harm actually being done.

Risk assessments seek to identify typical hazards – activities where accidents happen, such as:

- receipt of raw materials, for instance lifting, carrying;
- stacking and storage, such as the risk of falling materials;
- movement of people and materials, for instance falls, collisions;

- processing of raw materials, with a risk of exposure to toxic substances;
- maintenance of buildings, such as roof work, gutter cleaning;
- maintenance of plant and machinery, such as lifting tackle, installation of equipment;
- using electricity, for example using hand tools, extension leads;
- operating machines, for example operating without sufficient clearance, or at an unsafe speed; not using safety devices;
- failure to wear protective equipment, such as hats, boots and clothing;
- distribution of products or materials, for example the movement of vehicles;
- dealing with emergencies, such as spillages, fires, explosions;
- health hazards arising from the use of equipment or methods of working, for example VDUs, repetitive strain injuries from badly designed work stations or working practices.

Most accidents are caused by a few key activities. Assessors should concentrate initially on those that could cause serious harm. Operations such as roof work, maintenance and transport movement cause far more deaths and injuries each year than many mainstream activities.

When the hazards have been identified it is necessary to assess how high the risks are. This involves answering three questions:

- What is the worst result?
- How likely is it to happen?
- How many people could be hurt if things go wrong?

A probability rating system can be used such as:

- probable – likely to occur immediately or shortly;
- reasonably probable – probably will occur in time;
- remote – may occur in time;
- extremely remote – unlikely to occur.

Health and safety audits

Risk assessments identify specific hazards and quantify the risks attached to them. Health and safety audits provide for a much more comprehensive review of all aspects of health and safety policies, procedures and practices. They cover the following.

Policies

- Do health and safety policies meet legal requirements?
- Are senior managers committed to health and safety?
- How committed are other managers, team leaders and supervisors to health and safety?
- Is there a health and safety committee? If not, why not?
- How effective is the committee in getting things done?

Procedures

How effectively do the procedures:

- support the implementation of health and safety policies?
- communicate the need for good health and safety practices?
- provide for systematic risk assessments?
- ensure that accidents are investigated thoroughly?
- record data on health and safety which is used to evaluate performance and initiate action?
- ensure that health and safety considerations are given proper weight when designing systems of work or manufacturing and operational processes (including the design of equipment and work stations, the specification for the product or service, and the use of materials)?
- provide safety training, especially induction training and training when jobs or working methods are changed?

Safety practices

- To what extent do health and safety practices in all areas of the organization conform to the general requirements of the Health and Safety at Work Act and the specific requirements of the various regulations and codes of practice?
- What risk assessments have been carried out? What were the findings? What actions were taken?
- What is the health and safety performance of the organization as shown by performance indicators?
- Is the trend positive or negative? If the latter, what is being done about it?

- How thoroughly are accidents investigated? What steps have been taken to prevent their recurrence?
- What is the evidence that managers and supervisors are really concerned about health and safety?

Health and safety inspections

Health and safety inspections are designed to examine a specific area of the organization – an operational department or a manufacturing process – in order to locate and define any faults in the system, equipment, plant or machines, or any operational errors that might be a danger to health or the source of accidents. Health and safety inspections should be carried out on a regular and systematic basis by line managers and supervisors, with the advice and help of health and safety advisors.

Accident prevention

The prevention of accidents is achieved by the following actions:

- Identify the causes of accidents and the conditions under which they are most likely to occur.
- Take account of safety factors at the design stage – build safety into the system.
- Design safety equipment and protective devices, and provide protective clothing.
- Carry out regular risk assessments audits, inspections and checks, and take action to eliminate risks.
- Investigate all accidents resulting in damage to establish the cause and to initiate corrective action.
- Maintain good records and statistics in order to identify problem areas and unsatisfactory trends.
- Conduct a continuous programme of education and training on safe working habits and methods of avoiding accidents.
- Encourage approaches to leadership and motivation that do not place excessive demands on people.

Occupational health programmes

Occupational health programmes are designed to minimize the impact of work-related illnesses arising from work. The following actions are required:

- Eliminate the hazard at source through design and process engineering.
- Isolate hazardous processes and substances so that workers do not come into contact with them.
- Change the processes or substances used to promote better protection or eliminate the risk.
- Provide protective equipment, but only if changes to the design, process or specification cannot completely remove the hazard.
- Train workers to avoid risk.
- Maintain plant and equipment to eliminate the possibility of harmful emissions, controlling the use of toxic substances and eliminating radiation hazards.
- Adopt good housekeeping practices to keep premises and machinery clean and free from toxic substances.
- Conduct regular inspections to ensure that potential health risks are identified in good time.
- Carry out pre-employment medical examinations and regular checks on those exposed to risk.
- Ensure that ergonomic considerations (that is, those concerning the design and use of equipment, machines, processes and workstations) are taken into account in design specifications, establishing work routines and training. This is particularly important as a means of minimizing the incidence of repetitive strain injury (RSI).
- Maintain preventive medicine programmes which develop health standards for each job and involve regular audits of potential health hazards and regular examinations for anyone at risk.

Particular attention needs to be exercised on the control of stress, considered earlier in this chapter. Noise and fatigue should also be matters of concern.

Employee well-being: key learning points

Reasons for concern with well-being

Employers have a duty of care, and this means adopting a socially responsible approach to looking after their people.

Employers are responsible for creating a good work environment not only because it is their duty to do so, but also as part of the total reward system.

It is in the interests of employers to do so because this will increase the likelihood of their employees being committed to the organization, and help to establish it as a 'best place to work'.

The significance of the work environment

The work environment consists of the system of work, the design of jobs, working conditions and the ways in which people are treated at work by their managers and co-workers. Well-being is achieved when account is taken in designing the work system and the jobs in it of the needs of the people concerned. Working conditions need to meet health and safety requirements. The way people are treated is a matter of managerial behaviour, achieving work–life balance and dealing with issues such as stress, harassment and bullying.

The achievement of work–life balance

Flexible working is the most practical solution to establishing an effective work–life balance. This covers flexitime, home working, part-time working, compressed working weeks, annualized hours, job sharing and term-time-only working. It also refers to special leave schemes which provide employees with the freedom to respond to a domestic crisis or to take a career break without jeopardizing their employment status.

Managing stress

Employers have the social responsibility to provide a good quality of working life.

Excessive stress causes illness. Stress can result in inability to cope with the demands of the job, which creates more stress. Excessive stress can reduce employee effectiveness and therefore organizational performance.

Managing health and safety

Conduct risk assessments to identify hazards and analyse the risks attached to them.

Conduct health and safety audits to provide for a more comprehensive review of all aspects of health and safety policies, procedures and practices.

Conduct health and safety inspections to identify and deal with specific risks and hazards.

Health and safety inspections should be carried out on a regular and systematic basis by line managers and supervisors, with the advice and help of health and safety advisors.

Questions

1. What is work–life balance, and what can be done about it?
2. How can stress be managed?
3. What is the distinction between risk assessments, health and safety audits and health and safety inspections?

References

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