

EMPLOYERS IGNORE EAPS AT THEIR PERIL!

Employers can inexpensively minimise the risk of litigation by employees, improve productivity, and decrease staff costs. The answer lies in Employee Assistance Programmes, explains Mike Jenkins, Business Development Manager of Welplan.

Nearly half-a-million people in Britain experience work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill. This accounts for 13.4 million lost working days in the UK annually, according to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), and costs UK businesses an estimated £3.8 billion each year. According to the HSE's Psychosocial Working Conditions survey, stress is the largest cause of ill health in the workplace in the UK and Europe.

Bullying, ranging from actual physical violence and threats of violence to name-calling, sarcasm and teasing, is a big contributor to work-related stress, and costs employers up to £2 billion in lost revenue every year. One-in-nine people are bullied at work and one-in-five resign due to bullying.

Even more worrying for employers than reduced productivity and lower quality of service is the rise in litigation, as stressed employees are encouraged to make claims against the employers who put them in stressful situations. Claims against companies that fail to protect their employees from stress-related illnesses are increasing in frequency and size. Employment Tribunals have increased the maximum award they can make in cases where bullying and harassment are proven. The maximum amount for constructive dismissal is now £58,600.

Employees' claims are strengthened by the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, which requires employers to secure the physical and mental health, safety and welfare of employees while at work. Equally, the Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require employers to assess the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities and to take measures to control the identified risk. The HSE is planning to include stress as part of its workplace assessments. It is important that employers are seen to be doing something about the potential threat.

Offering a solution, the courts have recently acknowledged that an organisation with an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) has gone a long way in fulfilling its duty of care responsibilities. EAPs have been in the UK since the 1980s, but in recent years, with the increase of workplace stress, their use has extended across various industries.

The introduction of an EAP can help employers identify and deal with issues such as bullying and harassment, as well as stress. It can also assist employees with financial and legal problems before they escalate and begin to affect performance.

As well as demonstrating a duty of care to employees and minimising the risk of litigation, a well-run EAP can also reduce employee and organisational stress, provide a confidential and free service for employees, improve productivity and efficiency, combat harassment and bullying, and reduce staff turnover and absence rates. Furthermore, an EAP can act as a valuable staff recruitment and retention tool.

Welplan, the UK's leading supplier of employee benefit packages for the hvac industry, provides EAPs through BUPA to the building services industry. These include face-to-face counselling, helplines, matrimonial advice, and legal guidance.

Mike Jenkins, Welplan's business development manager, said: "A lot of employers are becoming more concerned about stress amongst their employees and the possibility that it may lead to litigation. The problem is, it is very difficult to do something about stress if you are unaware of the problem, and a lot of employees don't want to admit to their employers that they are stressed and finding it difficult to cope. That is why the confidentiality of EAPs make them so effective. It makes a valued employee benefit. Employees are able to find confidential help and outsiders can see that the employer is striving to provide help for his staff.

"At just 50p per month per employee, it is not a huge commitment for the employer, and the majority of businesses adopting an EAP report improvements in productivity. A lot of research has proven that where EAPs are incorporated into a business, job satisfaction goes up and absenteeism goes down. In today's society, with increasing litigation, demanding careers and home lives, and increasing mental health issues, employers can no longer afford to risk being without an EAP."