



EXTREME PRODUCTIVITY: Are Your Employees Hitting the Wall?



Supplement: Practical Suggestions by
Employee Segment



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To address the topic of extreme productivity in the workplace, the Disability Management Employer Coalition (DMEC) convened its 2008 Think Tank. The group's charge was to explore the causes and consequences of extreme productivity, while offering examples of strategies that help keep employees healthy, happy, and productive in an economically challenging environment.

Job stresses and extreme productivity demands vary from company-to-company, as well as job-to-job. The Think Tank identified some common themes for two large employee groups: blue-collar and white-collar workers as well as for individuals whose companies do not provide resources and support. Understanding the source of job stressors that are common to each group can help employers target interventions that are meaningful and effective for employees.

Key Recommendations for Employers with Blue-Collar Workers

- Employees typically experience corporate culture through their relationships with direct supervisors. Employers should encourage their front-line managers who have the closest contact with employees to make emotional connections with the people they supervise.
- Allow employees to make suggestions and design the production workflow. Employees who perform the work and know the tasks often have the best insight into how they can minimize job-associated stress and gain efficiency. At one production plant, for example, employees are able to rotate to different tasks in an order and at intervals they pre-determined to decrease physical and mental stress and optimize productivity.
- Make the link between health and workplace safety to secure buy-in from top management to health, wellness, and work-life initiatives. Top management needs to understand that it is important to lead by example but employees may not always be able to relate to their lifestyle goals. For example, the CEO training for a marathon may not influence an employee who is working two jobs to make ends meet.

Other suggestions for employers with a blue-collar workforce include:

- Complete an annual survey with questions about the employee's role in decision-making and whether his/her manager fosters teamwork, minimizes work stressors, is supportive, gives feedback, or schedules work shifts fairly. Discuss as a group and look for solutions. Check back each year.
- Allow employees to bid on extra overtime hours.
- Build a more supportive workplace by giving employees the tools they need to do their jobs.
- Stay in touch with front-line workers' concerns, especially in paternalistic organizations.
- Involve labor unions in discussions of problems and resolutions. Work with unions to secure their buy-in and assistance.

Rather than push for the maximum productivity, which is unsustainable, companies must promote optimal productivity to help employees achieve a better balance between their work and personal lives. Employers that fail to meet these challenges will lose their most precious resource - their human capital - to burnout.

- Establish a mentoring system.
- Perform an organizational risk/hazard assessment.
- Encourage employees to tap into their employee assistance program.
- Create an environment of open communication.
- Assess vulnerable populations in terms of the type and amount of work they do. Try to make accommodations.
- Assess job design to reduce the feeling of being overworked.
- Eliminate unnecessary tasks to reduce workload.
- Set realistic goals.
- Encourage workers to take time out a few minutes each day to take a brief walk or to sit quietly.

Key Recommendations for Employers with White-Collar Workers

- Corporate culture is the key and employer actions are the determining factor. Establish boundaries for employees who are operating in a “24/7” world. If an employer professes that it values work-life balance, but supervisors regularly send emails late at night or on weekends, what message do employees receive about constantly being available? Are employees expected to be “connected” on holidays or when they are on vacation?
- Educate and hold management accountable for a healthy workplace. Top executives should understand the connection between work-life balance and high productivity. In word and practice, deliver the message that operating at 100 percent is neither optimal – nor sustainable – and may lead to physical and mental health issues.
- Use teachable moments for intervention. Provide employees and/or their dependents with support and resource referrals when they reach out for help with specific situations. This is the opposite of the top-down approach to health and productivity and focuses instead on the specific needs of employees in times of stress or when other issues or problems arise.

Other suggestions for employers with white-collar employees include:

- Help employees “unplug from work” by inserting pop-up windows if employees check their email on weekends reminding employees to disconnect.
- Monitor vacation days and encourage employees who reach the limit of carryover days to use their time off.
- Help employees to understand the “business perspective” of being in the best health possible – intellectually, emotionally, and physically – in order to maintain optimal productivity.
- Offer and encourage telecommuting. Ninety percent of teleworkers say they are as productive, or more productive, when telecommuting than when they are in the office. Nearly 40 percent of employees are eligible for teleworking but far less (5-15%) actually do it.
- Have managers set an example for employees by taking an afternoon off occasionally.
- Build a more supportive workplace.

- Set realistic goals and assist with setting priorities.
- Think of tasks that turn your employees “on” rather than overwhelm them.
- Recognize and celebrate achievements, successes, and victories.
- Spend time with your happy and productive employees. Use input about what they like most about their jobs to develop an interview format that will help you determine whether job candidates share similar traits with your best employees.
- Create information services to help employees maintain balance between their work and family lives such as life management or concierge services.
- Promote resiliency or stress hardiness strategies.
- Encourage setting aside strategic thinking time to allow creative juices to be unleashed and open the door to “aha moments.”
- Identify and mitigate pressures that affect job performance including workload management practices and teamwork.
- Encourage employees to take family with them on business trips when appropriate or communicate frequently with them when they are away from home.
- Integrate health, wellness and employee assistance programs.

Key Recommendations for Individuals

Employees, too, can take charge of their own health and productivity with greater self-advocacy and interventions. This is crucial in work environments where there is little or no support from employers for work-life balance and stress management.

- Identify community resources for financial counseling, childcare or eldercare issues, or other concerns that may impact your life before something happens. If your company does not have an employee assistance program, community resources can help fill that gap.
- Find an outside activity that involves positive, healthy interaction with others. Personal, social, and professional networks are key to self-care.
- Acknowledge the reality of the situation. Rather than hope for a “miracle solution” begin with accepting things as they are and strive toward workable strategies.
- Develop a relationship with a trusted or admired peer to seek advice on how to manage work and life demands.
- Good nutrition and exercise are paramount. Find time to exercise or walk each day – a short 10 minute walk can improve your health and decrease stress.
- Establish family mealtimes for better interaction. Families are also great reinforcements for better health, wellness, and self-care.
- Develop healthy sleep habits. If you’re working two jobs, try to find time for a “sleep break” in order to avoid physical and mental exhaustion.

- Observe and learn from your own signals when you feel close to “hitting the wall.” Pay attention to physiological, emotional, and behavioral signs, and determine what you can do (taking a break, avoiding a difficult conversation, or shifting your focus) to minimize stress.
- Ask for training or read materials on how you can build your personal resilience.

Other tips for individuals include:

- Try meditation. It can improve focus and increase relaxation.
- Think positive thoughts. Visualizing success can increase its chance of happening. Look for the silver lining in events.
- Disengage yourself by doing something totally unrelated. Often disengaging can lead to “aha” moments.
- Take allotted vacation time and really use it to rest and disengage from work.
- Stay in touch with family via phone, email or video-enhanced web chat that is available on many newer laptops while on the road.
- Take family with you if you can while you travel on business or extend your time and have your family join you before or after the business portion of your trip.
- Utilize your employee assistance program.
- Set aside time for personal reflection every week.
- Take a nap or lay down for 20 minutes each day. It will not only refresh you but also increase your productivity and creativity.
- Be realistic about how long things take and allow time for the unexpected.
- Be the gatekeeper of your time. When interrupted ask yourself, “Is this something I need to deal with now?” When asked to take on additional work, ask for clarification, expectations, and a timeline.
- Be patient with yourself and beware of perfectionism.
- Be aware of your body’s signals of stress (headaches, stiff neck, heart racing). Use this as a sign that you need to walk away from what you are doing and take a break.
- Concentrate on what you can control, not what you can’t control.

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Acknowledgements

DMEC wishes to thank the Extreme Productivity Think Tank sponsors:

Aetna
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 EMPLOYER COALITION**

DMEC is the only nonprofit national trade association dedicated to the Integrated Absence and Disability Management profession. Its mission is to provide educational resources and to provide guidance in the areas of workforce disability, absence, health, and productivity. This mission is met through national, regional and local conferences, e-learning resources, training programs, publications, and practical tools.

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