

EMPLOYEE BURNOUT: A WORKPLACE SAFETY HAZARD?

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Employee burnout is now an officially diagnosable condition. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), which recently updated its definition, employee burnout is not a *medical* condition. Instead, the WHO calls burnout an “occupational phenomenon.” Here’s how [the organization is defining it](#):

Burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: (1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; (2) increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and (3) reduced professional efficacy. Burnout refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.

The WHO’s definition likely comes as no surprise to the multitude of employees who have experienced a sense of feeling “burnt out” at some point in their careers. But what does this mean for employers? Are you now liable for employee burnout in the workplace? Can burnout be considered a safety hazard? Here’s what you should know about employee burnout and its safety implications.

BURNOUT AND WORKER SAFETY

First and foremost, no Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards govern work-related burnout. That means there are no OSHA regulations requiring you to have a workplace “employee burnout” policy or plan for dealing with workers’ affected by burnout.

Related People



Chantell C. Foley

Partner

502.561.3969



Todd B. Logsdon

Partner

502.561.3971

However, under the federal Occupational Safety and Health Act, you have a duty to protect all employees from certain workplace hazards. When you think about an employer's obligations to keep its workplace free of hazards, maybe you think of machine-guarding, lockout/tagout, or fall hazards. Maybe you even think of the less obvious hazards, such as ergonomics, workplace harassment, and violence. But rarely does anyone consider burnout a hazard. Yet recent studies suggest that employee burnout has the potential to impact many facets of work performance and safety.

For instance, some studies suggest that burnt-out employees have less awareness of their surroundings and struggle to maintain workplace safety practices, resulting in the misuse of heavy machinery, delayed emergency response, poor driving, employee fighting, and issues caused by getting behind on work-related tasks. If left unaddressed, a burned-out employee has the potential to be an unsafe worker which could lead to a workplace accident that affects other employees who suffer injuries.

While we are not aware of OSHA citing an employer for not preventing burnout, injuries as a result of a burned-out employee could potentially result in costly citations and workers' compensation claims. Because of these potential risks, it's important to take the appropriate precautions to reduce any potential liability.

WHAT SHOULD AN EMPLOYER DO?

To prevent burnout from having a negative impact on workplace safety (and to avoid or lessen the risk of liability), early identification and intervention is key. While it's easy to tell whether a worker is wearing a hard hat, safety glasses, or other pieces of personal protective equipment, it is often difficult to determine whether someone is dealing with work-related burnout. With this in mind, you and your managers should be on the lookout for some common warning signs, such as trouble with concentration, fatigue, low morale, anxiety, irritability, alcohol or drug use, workplace incidents, and violence.

Whether or not any of these early signs are detected, you can start by simply talking to employees about burnout. You can also offer training and support, discuss available resources (such as employee assistance programs and paid time off), and how to report safety concerns, injuries, and

illnesses. You should also be prepared to address symptoms should any come up. Keep in mind, OSHA law prohibits you from retaliating or discriminating against a worker for reporting a safety issue, injury, or illness. With the WHO's new definition of burnout as an "occupational phenomenon," this could possibly include any concerns regarding burnout hazards that are reported or discovered.

CONCLUSION

Employee burnout is not an obvious hazard, but neglecting to control work-related burnout hazards can have an adverse effect on safety in your workplace. Creating awareness campaigns and training initiatives to recognize symptoms of employee burnout and the safety hazards caused by fatigue or lack of concentration may save your workplace from injuries and illnesses down the road.

For more information, contact the authors at CFoley@fisherphillips.com (502.561.3969) or TLogsdon@fisherphillips.com (502.561.3971).