



# Information Overload

Issue 25, September 2004

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## Welcome:

Welcome to this month's issue of Information Overload. This month we will be asking how healthy are you and does this have an impact on the organisation that you work for? We take a look at what is perhaps one of the biggest hazards in today's working environment, and what we can all do to eliminate and control the problem.

As always, if you would like to see us cover any other topics, we would love to hear from you. Just send an e-mail to [training@iea.com.au](mailto:training@iea.com.au). We would like to thank you in advance for forwarding this edition to friends and colleagues.

We hope you enjoy reading, have a great week.

Lorraine Bradshaw  
Marketing & Training Coordinator

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## In this Issue we will be looking at:

- A modern epidemic;
- That's not a hazard – is it?
- Does stress cause more harm than other hazards?
- But I like working, so why do I have to stop?
- A Thought to Ponder.

### A Modern Epidemic

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001 more than 7 million Australian Adults were classed as overweight and at risk from weight related health problems such as diabetes and heart disease. This frightening statistic has far reaching implications, putting a strain on not only joints and seams on clothing, but on the health service in its duty to care for the community. But what of the employers who are looking to maintain its operational effectiveness in the marketplace, by trying to determine what would happen if some or all of its staff become ill and unable to work.

But whose problem is it? Is it the responsibility of an employee to make sure that they are fit to work and eat a sensible diet, exercise according to latest research and guidelines (who hasn't seen the find 30 campaign, urging all Australians to find ways of finding 30 minutes a day to exercise?), ensure they get an annual check up at the doctors for a clean bill of health and go to work safe in the knowledge that they are providing the best, most valuable asset any company can have.

Or is the responsibility of an employer to ensure that the people that they employ are fit and healthy to work. Providing such things as health checks, gym memberships, providing fruit for morning tea instead of biscuits and pastries, and making sure that the work they are asking people to do is covered under the occupational health and safety guidelines and free from hazards such as stress, overwork, bullying, constant deadlines, as well as ensuring the workplace is safe – protecting its workers from poorly maintained buildings, fixtures and fittings,

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and making sure all guidelines are followed – such as safe lifting practices.

It is perhaps fair to say that the responsibility is a shared one. Whilst it is an employer's responsibility to maintain a safe and healthy work environment, only I can be responsible for what I eat. No-one forces me to have a piece of cake for morning tea, or a hamburger and french fries for lunch, just as no-one forces me to drink 8 cups of coffee a day and makes me go for a walk during my lunch break. They are all decisions that I make on a daily basis, just as the decisions you make about your lifestyle is up to you.

I can hear a collective muttering about, "but you don't know what it's like to work where I work, and be expected to do what I am expected to do in the time I have been given, AND make time to eat properly and exercise. Sure I'd eat properly and go for a walk if I had the time."

It is true that some people do cope with stress and deadlines by not taking the prescribed meal and tea breaks, eating at their desks thinking that they are getting more done. At the other end of the spectrum are those people who eat simply because they are bored, or use cigarettes to get them through their working days.

But before you put in a few extra hours of work at your desk, consider the fact that it could be deadly.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> January 2003 CCH Australia Limited reported that a 32 year old male who sat at his computer terminal for up to 18 hours per day nearly died after he developed a blood clot in his leg which traveled to his lungs. The condition has been dubbed e-thrombosis, whilst it sounds frivolous, is a serious problem for a considerable proportion of ourselves and our colleagues. The doctors reporting on the first ever case said "In view of the very dominant way in which the computer has influenced our lifestyle, it really was something that we needed to look at in

more detail." The doctors have suggested flexing one's toes and ankles, drinking water and avoiding alcohol, and getting up to stretch one's legs at least once an hour." <http://www.cch.com.au>

### **An Employers Duty of Care**

Under the Occupational Safety and Health Act, an employer has two (2) types of duties towards its workers under the occupational safety and health laws. These are:

#### **A general duty of care:**

- Ensure your employees (this includes apprentices) are not exposed to hazards in the course of their work and
- Ensure that people who aren't your employees are not exposed to safety or health risks arising from the work being done.

#### **Special, particular duties:**

- In addition to the general duty of care, there are other more specific duties that an employer must ensure. These are:
- Providing and maintaining plant and systems of work that do not expose your employees to hazards;
- Ensuring that plant and substances are used, handled, stored and transported safely;
- Giving employees whatever information, instruction, training and supervision is necessary, particularly about the plant, equipment and substances (such as chemicals) they use in their work, including the provision of protective clothing and equipment
- Maintaining the working environment in a safe condition.

<http://www.austlii.edu.au>

### **That's Not a Hazard – Is It?**

A hazard is classed as anything that can cause injury or harm to a person and includes:

- Slips, trips and falls;
- Electrical currents and appliances;

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- Manual Handling – including over exertion and repetitive movements;
- Extremes of temperature;
- Machinery or equipment;
- Hazardous substances such as glue, toner and photocopying fumes;
- Biological agents;
- Radiation – eg a faulty microwave; and
- Psychological stress such as intimidation, bullying and time pressures.

Of these it is perhaps interesting to note that stress related illnesses had a far greater impact on the workforce than any of the other hazards.

### **Does Stress Cause More Harm Than Other Hazards?**

In the 1995 Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Surveys (AWIRS) 26% percent of people surveyed claimed to have had a stress related injury or illness during the previous 12 months. (Please note the 1995 survey was the last major survey conducted by the Australian Government. A date for a third survey has not yet been set.). It is interesting to note that only 17% of survey respondents cited a physical injury during the same period.

According to the Medical Benefits Fund of Australia (MBF) (<http://www.mbf.com.au>):

- Sick leave and Workers Compensation pay-outs cost around \$10.6 billion every year (Source: Wooden, M, 1990, The cost of time off work in Australia, Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources, 1-10)
- Coronary heart disease costs \$65 million in sick leave and \$652 million in lost earnings every year (National Heart Foundation, 1995, Heart and Stroke Facts)
- Hypertension costs \$75 million in sick leave and \$15 million in lost earnings

per year (National Heart Foundation, 1995, Heart and Stroke Facts)

- Stroke costs \$27 million in sick leave and \$156 million in lost earnings each year (National Heart Foundation, 1995, Heart and Stroke Facts)
- Employees who rate low for cardiovascular fitness register 2.5 times the rate of absenteeism compared to those in the excellent fitness category (Tucker et al, 1990, Cardiovascular Fitness and Absenteeism in 8,301 Employed Adults, American Journal of Health Promotion, Vol 5, No 2)
- Smokers take an average of 15 hours more sick leave per year than non-smokers (Jones et al, 1990, A Study of Work Site Health Promotion Programs and Absenteeism, Journal of Occupational Medicine, Vol 32, No 2)

[https://www.mbf.com.au/livingwell/articles\\_1999\\_07/work\\_cant\\_live\\_without\\_it.html](https://www.mbf.com.au/livingwell/articles_1999_07/work_cant_live_without_it.html)

### **A Corporate Health Check**

MBF's corporate health check survey found that employers are becoming increasingly aware of the nation's weight problem with 37% of organisations reporting that they currently have a workplace health program in place. An additional 24% of those organisations who don't have a program have said they hope to introduce one in the next 12 months.

However, 94% admitted that the physical health of their employees is an important factor contributing to an organisations overall productivity. Of those, 39% believed employers have an obligation to ensure their employees had access to a workplace program.

Mr David Jones, media manager for MBF in an interview with Human Capital Australia said "This shows that companies recognise the obesity epidemic as a national health problem – but don't want their involvement to become an obligation

in terms of formal conditions of employment.”

*Employee Health: A Weighty Issue: Human Capital Australia, Issue 2.8, p6*

### **But I like working, so why do I have to stop?**

Would you like to retire from the workforce? What age would you like to stop working? And what are you going to do when you don't have to get up at 7.00am every morning to catch the 8.00am shuttle into work every day?

For some people the thought of retiring is wonderful, they can't wait to go on those long holidays, play golf, and spend time with their children and grand children. But for others the thought of retiring from the active paid workforce is perhaps the most stressful of all decisions to make, simply because work was their whole life, and suddenly with the prospect of endless days with nothing to do can be a killer.

We have all been advised to have a better work and life balance, so that we can spread our energies and our enthusiasm over more than one component of our busy lives, but should we be forced to give up paid work when we are officially supposed to stop working. Or should it be a personal decision?

Whilst the traditional retirement age of workers is 65 years of age, there are

some people who either don't want to give up work, because they enjoy the job that they do, or they feel that they have to work because they cannot afford to retire.

If you are in good health, can contribute to the organisation that you are working for, and you want to continue to work (for whatever your reason), and the organisation that you are working for supports your decision, surely the choice should be yours to continue to work or not. Or should you give up your place for a younger, and probably less experienced person? As we have seen the debate surrounding Prime Minister John Howard intensify as the election looms closer, we have to ask the question – are we discriminating against an entire section of our population, and does it matter how old you are if you can still do the job?

Well to add fuel to the debate, Westpac, ANZ and McDonalds have announced policies to encourage the recruitment and retention of older employees in their workforce. It has been estimated that by 2050 more than a quarter of Australia's workforce will be over the age of 65.

*Human Capital Australia, October 2003, p5 "Keeping grey workforce, says gov't."*

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### **A Thought to Ponder:**

“Vacation is time off to remind employees that the business can get along without them”

**Earl Wilson**

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Your comments and suggestions on the subject of this newsletter are most welcome. Or if you would like to see other issues covered in future editions, please email [training@iea.com.au](mailto:training@iea.com.au)

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