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Training programs can reduce workplace stress

Few industries today are as stressful as high tech. A constantly changing marketplace, pressure from investors and competitors, organizational restructuring, and continued downsizing/outourcing combine to create a highly stressed work environment for employees at tech companies.

Stress in the workplace has become so prevalent that it is generally accepted as a cost of doing business. But stress overload is becoming an expensive problem — the total health and productivity cost of worker stress to American business is estimated at between \$50 billion and \$150 billion annually. The good news is employees who are able to manage stress effectively have fewer health complaints, better work/life balancing skills, and greater job satisfaction.

In a recent Gallup poll, 50 percent of workers said they need help in managing stress on the job. The goal of any stress management program should be to achieve a sustained, long-term behavior change. As employees improve their stress management skills, there should be a corresponding improvement in performance, such as better concentration and mental clarity, more creative and innovative thought processes, increased productivity, and overall happier and healthier employees.

• **New techniques** — The art of meditation has made its way into the corporate environment and is one of the best ways to reduce stress in the workplace. Companies like IBM Corp., Medtronic Inc., Surface Logix Inc., and Shuster Laboratories Inc. are offering medita-

tion programs on-site to their employees to help them reduce stress. Meditation workshops have become a valuable training tool in the workplace because meditation has so many practical applications. It is a skill that can be easily learned and can be done anywhere, anytime stress occurs — walking down the hall, at a worker's desk, or in a stressful meeting. Even a few minutes of meditation done throughout the day can make a huge difference in a worker's attitude, productivity and effectiveness. Another program that is becoming popular in the workplace is yoga, which is a form of moving meditation.

• **Set an example** — If you want your employees to take advantage of any stress reduction programs you offer, you need to create a culture that values health and wellness. This means encouraging managers to attend these sessions and educating employees that taking a break from their hectic workday will actually expand their coping skills, help them feel more calm and focused, and improve their ability to do their jobs.

• **Look beyond your EAP** — Many employers turn to their Employee Assistance Programs for stress management, but this is not always the best resource to create a sustainable program. Most EAPs offer stress management programs, but it's not typically their specialty. Programs are often occasional lectures on work-life balance and time management versus learning an actual skill that can be used in the moment that stress occurs.

• **Do it regularly** — Learning how to reduce stress is a lot like learning a new language. Once you learn the proper techniques you have to keep practicing them both on your own and in a structured/mentored environment. The most successful stress management programs are not one-time seminars,

but ongoing programs that reinforce and build on the stress reduction techniques that employees have learned. Whether it's weekly, monthly, or even quarterly, the key is to have a stress management program in place that employees are encouraged to participate in with some regularity.

• **A good ROI** — According to a recent article in *The Economist*, companies need to find new ways to attract and retain the rising number of skilled workers who seek greater work-life balance because "it costs one-and-a-half times a worker's salary and benefits to replace them and that retaining just 20 workers a year, who would otherwise have left, saves a company \$2.6 million per year." That is a staggering number. Yet, for example, a company can set up a monthly on-site meditation program for as little as a few thousand dollars a year. That translates to a significant return on investment when measured against the high cost of employee turnover, lost productivity due to absenteeism, and rising health-care costs due to stress-related illnesses.

Stress in the workplace is a serious problem. Regardless of your company's size or budget, it's possible to implement a stress management program that will help you maintain or achieve a high-performance organization. Making sure that employees are energized, not stressed out, by workplace demands ultimately benefits both the company and the employees.

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