

Workload the leading stressor for NZ businesses big and small

Media Release - Tuesday, 1 August 2017 by *Janine Kendall*

Workplace stress continues to rise across New Zealand businesses, with general workload now being the leading cause of anxiety not just for larger enterprises, but smaller ones too.

That's one of the key findings of the biennial Wellness in the Workplace Survey just released by Southern Cross Health Society and BusinessNZ.

It's the third time the biennial survey, which canvassed 109 private and public sector businesses representing more than 93,000 employees (about five per cent of New Zealand's workforce), has been carried out, and BusinessNZ CEO Kirk Hope says it's now possible to see trends forming.

"We can see that stress and anxiety levels are on the rise for the second consecutive time during the life of the survey, though overall they remain more on the moderate than the high side.

"What's new this time is that workload is now the key cause of stress for smaller businesses. Previously that's been the domain of larger enterprises with 50 or more staff."

The proportion of smaller businesses recording 'long hours' is also up from 8.1 per cent in 2014 to 22 per cent in 2016.

While more than half of respondents reported little change in stress levels, those that did noted marked increases; up a net 37 per cent for bigger businesses and a net 24 per cent for smaller ones. Across all business sizes stress was up by a net 22.9 per cent.

Southern Cross Health Society CEO Nick Astwick says the findings are concerning, but not surprising. "Last year we surveyed more than 500 of our corporate customers and for those that have a wellbeing initiative in place, their top motivator for doing so is to reduce stress. Unfortunately New Zealand is by no means unique in this area. It's estimated around 38 per cent of the world's workers are suffering from excessive pressure on the job ."

He says most western-style countries are becoming increasingly aware of health issues and the impact of stress, fatigue and lifestyle choices on staff wellbeing and work performance.

The good news out of the survey is that there's been a slight improvement in the likelihood of businesses having a family-friendly workplace that supports work-life balance.

It found that the top three family-friendly policies businesses are likely to offer are flexible hours, a transitioned return to work, and the ability to work from home.

Both larger and smaller businesses are also now more likely to have some form of employee assistance programme to help staff manage stress (the figure for businesses with fewer than 50 staff has more than doubled since 2014 to 32%).

And Astwick says Southern Cross Health Society's BeingWell hub, being launched later this month, has been specifically designed to help those businesses keen to establish a workplace health and wellness programme.

He says the digital hub allows businesses to work with Southern Cross to tailor a package

that suits their needs and budget, ranging from free on-line starter kits through to bespoke coaching and expert seminars. An app that calculates a personal health score for each individual will follow later in the year.

“There’s recognition now that wellness programmes can boost factors like staff engagement, productivity and retention. Given that most of us will spend about 90,000 hours at work during our lifetimes, it makes sense for employers to support the health and wellbeing of their staff while they’re on the job; it’s a win-win.”

Recent Massey University research into Southern Cross Health Society’s own staff wellbeing programme showed the not-for-profit insurer saves an estimated \$1072 per employee per year through reduced absenteeism and, conservatively, \$268 per employee per year in productivity savings.

“Ninety-four per cent of our employees feel we care about their wellbeing and 87 per cent say participating in our wellness programme has had a positive impact on their health and wellbeing,” Astwick says.

“That’s immensely valuable when you consider how the health of your staff impacts the health and wealth of your business.”

ENDS

[Southern Cross Health Society-BusinessNZ Wellness in the Workplace Survey 2017](#)

Other key survey findings and additional information

- Larger businesses have remained more stressful environments, although the gap is closing.
- Larger businesses are more likely to have stress identification processes in place, while businesses with fewer than 50 staff are also now more likely to employ such mechanisms.
- The top three practices undertaken by businesses as part of stress identification are staff surveys, training for managers to identify and manage stress, and risk assessments.
- The top three stress management processes are employee assistance programmes, flexible hours, and mobile working devices and IT support.
- It is still the case that the larger the business, the greater the stress level, although not by a significant margin.
- ‘General workload’ is the greatest stressor for large and small businesses, followed by ‘Family relationships’ and ‘Pressure to meet work targets’. Other, lesser, stressors included
- ‘Management style/work relationships’, ‘Long hours’, ‘Financial concerns’, ‘Personal illness/health’ and ‘Lack of training’.
- Larger businesses tend to do a good job of identifying and putting processes in place for stress/anxiety issues.