



# EAP SUPERVISOR ENHANCEMENT NEWSLETTER

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DEER OAKS PRESENTS

Supervisor Excellence Webinar Series

*Emotional Intelligence for Supervisors*

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# THE EFFECTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESSORS IN THE WORKPLACE (PART 2)

## Psychological Stressors at Work: How Employers Can Respond (cont.)

### Continuously look for ways to redesign, redistribute, and reschedule.

When it comes to helping employees manage heavy workloads, avoiding or removing this stressor may appear impractical at first, given that the work still needs to get done. However, providing employees with some sense of choice, freedom, and flexibility in the work that they do and when they do it can help reduce their stress so that they are able to better manage their responsibilities.

One strategy that's becoming increasingly common among both employers and their workers is job rotation: in which employees rotate between two or more jobs within the organization.<sup>1</sup> When employees are forced to complete the same tasks over and over again, they can soon grow bored or fatigued, which can subsequently cause them to perceive their workload to be more burdensome than it actually is. Alternatively, research shows that when employees are given a variety of different tasks at work, they become more motivated, innovative, and creative, as they encounter different situations that require different solutions.<sup>2</sup> Sharing work also allows employees to get to know each other better, which can also work to reduce workers' stress as they begin to trust that if their work piles up, they'll be able to reach out to their peers for help.

Even without implementing a job-rotation strategy, employers can assess whether certain assignments or tasks can be redistributed if an employee's workload increases or becomes too overbearing. Another helpful way to make one's workload seem less daunting is by considering whether tasks can be reprioritized or if deadlines can be rescheduled. For instance, if a worker has a time-sensitive, taxing assignment that they're working on, their supervisors can look at their schedule to assess whether peripheral tasks can be pushed back, if not reassigned.



By allowing workers more time to complete their assignments when they have a busy workload, employers can help to relieve stress about impending deadlines and dispel fears that they may have about not being able to get their work done or not being able to produce high-quality work. This can inadvertently help them to work faster and more efficiently as they lose their perceived sense of time pressure, which may even result in them getting their work done ahead of their rescheduled deadlines.

Employers should also strive to be fair and realistic when it comes to setting deadlines and expectations—especially in situations where workers are taking on new tasks that require them to gain new skills—and ensure that employees are encouraged to work at a pace that is natural and beneficial for them in order to prevent the risk of high stress.

## Leverage technology for a better employee experience.

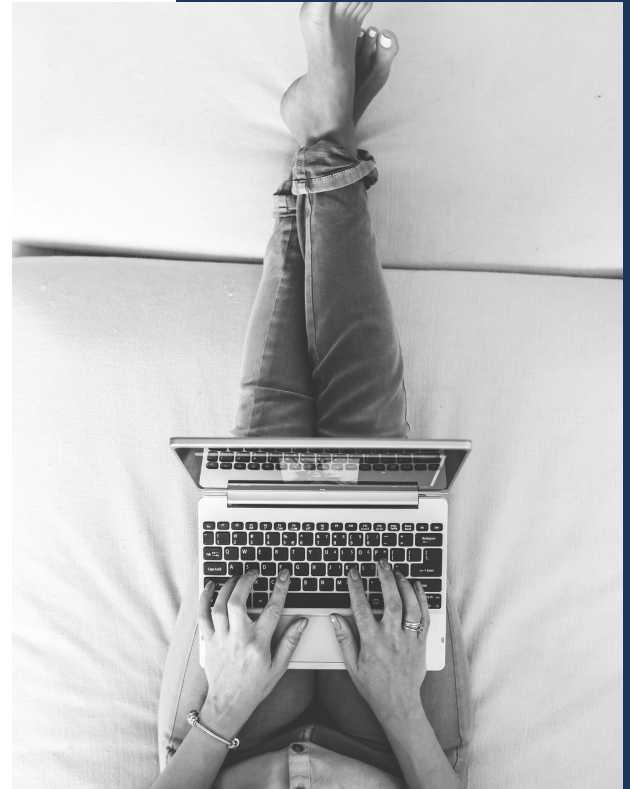
Although today's workforce is overwhelmingly in favor of tech in the workforce, with over 80 percent of Gen Z workers looking for employment that allows them to work with cutting-edge technology, there seems to be a bit of a disconnect between employers' satisfaction with tech and their workers' satisfaction with it. New findings from PwC reveal that while 90 percent of C-suite executives believe their organization pays attention to people's needs when introducing new tech, only about half of their employees say the same.<sup>3</sup>

There are a number of factors that play a hand in this discrepancy. Of course, there's the anxiety that tech may eliminate their jobs, which can lead to initial resistance from employees to adapt to technological changes.<sup>4</sup> Then there's the well-substantiated concern about increased surveillance.<sup>5</sup> Lastly—and most importantly—is the issue of poor managerial support. Employees want to learn how to use technology—and they're willing to put in the extra time to do so—but too many employers are failing to provide adequate training to support them.<sup>6</sup>

So, what can be done?

**First, employers need to be considerate and transparent in their communications** with employees about any changes being made regarding technology in the workplace. Clearly articulating the purpose of added technologies; providing employees with the opportunity to raise concerns, doubts, or questions; and reassuring them that they will be supported throughout the transition is the best way to gain and sustain workers' approval of these advancements. By giving employees the opportunity to talk about tech and participate in the rollout of new technologies, employers can get a sense of what they'll need to be trained on.

**When it comes to training, employers should be sure to offer a hands-on experience** that demonstrates real-world applications of new technologies,<sup>7</sup> giving employees a chance to develop new skills and sharpen old ones; something that more than four in five employees say they want from their employers.<sup>8</sup> By effectively communicating the benefits that these technologies will have on employees' current work experience as well as their future career prospects, employers can alleviate workers' reluctance to use new tech and thus alleviate the stress they might be experiencing due to these changes.



In order to avoid additional stress or frustration with technology—and in order to provide employees with relevant opportunities for upskilling—**employers should also try to opt for easy-to-use, trending workplace technology** that aims to simplify and improve employees' work experience. This includes the use of no-code tools; dynamic access and authorization systems; integrated apps<sup>9</sup>; objectives and key results (OKR) software<sup>10</sup>; all-in-one management tools like SmartTask (<https://www.smarttask.io>); automated tech for repetitive tasks such as data entry<sup>10,11</sup>; and digital workplace software like Google Workspace, Slack, and Microsoft Teams.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, what employees are hoping for when it comes to tech additions in the workplace is digital assistance, rather than replacements. Employees are still overwhelmingly in favor of face-to-face interactions at work, but they would prefer digital assistance when it comes to completing some of their more mundane or technical tasks, including HR tasks, scheduling time off, and enrolling for benefits.<sup>3,14</sup>

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# SUPPORTING AN EMPLOYEE WITH A CHRONIC ILLNESS

When you, as a manager, learn that an employee has a chronic illness, you may have questions about how to respond. How do you find out what the employee needs without violating their privacy? How do you accommodate the employee's needs while still managing your team to get required work done? How do you explain any work accommodations to the rest of the team without disclosing confidential information? How do you help the ill employee continue to contribute and feel included and valued at work?

## Understanding the Ill Employee's Experience

It can be helpful to get a general sense of a typical worker's experience when diagnosed with a chronic illness that affects their ability to work. The news can trigger a cascade of personal changes. The employee might reflect on their identity and their priorities. They may need to make time for treatment. They may need to manage their energy in new ways to preserve their health. These changes can affect how, when, and where they are able to do their work. If they need to reduce their work output or change their work hours, they may worry about being seen as lazy, incompetent, or not committed to work—even when they are fully engaged and contributing to the best of their ability.

Remember that every person and every situation is unique. The employee you work with may experience some, all, or none of these reactions.

## How to Respond as a Manager

As a manager, your role is to understand the unique and changing needs of the ill employee, seek ways to accommodate those needs by making appropriate adjustments at work (in compliance with the organization's policies and legal obligations), and balance those needs with work requirements and the goal of maintaining a high-performing team.

Here are some tips on supporting an employee with a chronic illness with empathy and respect:

- **Foster an environment where open and honest conversation feels safe.** By your own words and actions, and by the behavior you encourage or discourage on your team, build an environment where it feels safe to voice different opinions and talk about personal needs. In an environment of psychological safety, an employee is more likely to be open with you about changing needs related to a chronic illness.
- **Respect work-life boundaries.** It's good to set clear expectations and hold employees to high standards, but do it in a way that respects boundaries between your employees' work and their lives outside of work. In an environment with healthy work-life boundaries, employees shouldn't feel guilty about taking time to attend to their health.
- **Respect the employee's privacy.** When an employee requests special accommodations at work or shares information with you about a chronic illness, don't pry for information beyond what you need to know. Keep confidential information private. Share it only with the employee's permission and only with those who need to know, such as your human resources (HR) representative. Talk with the employee about whether and how to share information about their illness with other team members.
- **Ask what the employee would find helpful.** Don't assume you know what the employee wants or needs. Ask them.
- **Listen with an open mind.** Many chronic illnesses have no outward symptoms. Listen to and trust your employee when they tell you how their illness affects their work. Understand that some chronic illnesses affect people in fluctuating and unpredictable ways. Listen to the employee's suggestions about how the work might be done differently. Hear them out, and consider ways you might be able to make their ideas work.
- **Be creative and flexible.** Let go of rigid assumptions about how work "should" get done, how it's "always been" done before, and what it means to be a good and valuable employee. Think about new ways the employee might contribute that fit with their schedule constraints and that draw on their strengths and abilities without draining their energy in unhealthy ways.

- **Consult with HR about your organization's policies and benefits.** Engage with your HR department as you seek creative ways to accommodate your employee's needs and make good use of their abilities. Your HR department knows what's possible under company policy and what's required in terms of disability accommodation. They can also help you come up with solutions that have broad benefit to everyone involved: the ill employee, the rest of the team, customers, and the organization.
- **Help the ill employee stay connected and feel included.** Stepping back from full-time work or doing some of the work remotely can leave an employee feeling disconnected and excluded. Colleagues, thinking they are being protective and kind, can shut the ill employee out of engaging work opportunities. Make an extra effort to include the ill employee in meetings and social events. Keep checking in with the employee to find out if they are comfortable with their level of engagement at work.
- **Be available.** Make it clear to the employee that you're available to talk whenever they have questions or their needs change. You may need to adjust the solutions you come up with once you've had a chance to try them out. What was a comfortable plan at one stage of the illness may not be working when the condition changes or treatments place new demands on the employee's time.



### For More Information

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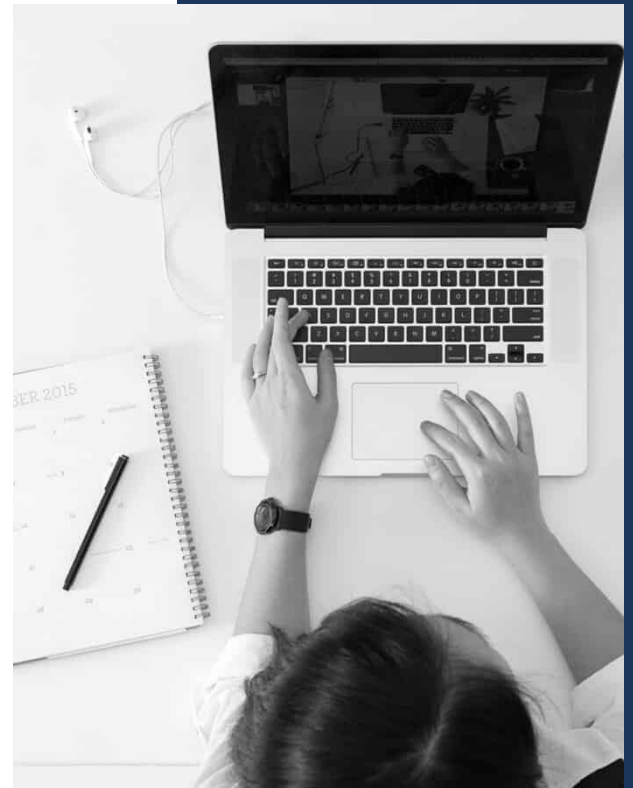
# ASK YOUR EAP!

**Q. I promised a couple of my employees that I would address the bad attitude of one of our office staff. I am procrastinating because I am not sure how to go about it. Is there a recommended approach.**

A. Have a private meeting and explain the problem with examples of the behavior you have witnessed. (Note, if this is your first meeting, mention the EAP as a resource, but later make a formal referral if needed.) Instances you've witnessed are better than hearsay, because employees with attitude problems are well versed at denying second-hand reports of their transgressions. Clearly communicate what is expected in terms of attitude and behavior. Don't omit what the future may hold in the behavior is not corrected. (This means disciplinary measures.) A key part of your intervention should be giving feedback. Do so regularly, be specific, and mention the positive changes, but also any continuation of the attitude problem. Another aspect of this intervention is asking the employee to come to you with any issues or concerns about the job, work environment, or even other employees. The goal here is to deal with issues as a manager and eliminate the likelihood of the employee aggressing against fellow workers.

**Q. What is the language specifically, that I can use to encourage an employee to use the employee assistance program before I make a formal referral? What I am looking for is firm language that motivate the employee as a self-referral without me being demanding.**

A. Success at motivating an employee to self-refer to the EAP often depends on the nature of the personal problem. Problems associated with strong denial, enabling, and secrecy are not likely to self-refer easily, but it does happen. For example, it is a myth that employees with serious drug or alcohol use disorders never self-refer. Certainly, their decision to refer is often preceded by a crisis that generates great urgency, but anyone who has worked in an addiction treatment program will tell you that it happens regularly. Here is a script that motivates most workers to use the EAP, and it is a firm approach: "John, it is possible that a personal problem may be contributing to your impaired performance. Therefore, I strongly urge you to contact the EAP at [place/phone/program name]. Whether you do or not, I will be meeting with you in [number of days/date] at [specific time] to consider the next step if there is no significant improvement with [job performance issue.]



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