

STUDENT SUMMARY NOTES

chapter 12 employee health, safety and wellness

Chapter overview

Chapter 12 emphasizes that to follow the logic of the HRM model, employers and managers need to provide a safe and healthy workplace for the human assets. After examining the role of health and safety in the workplace and the development of health and safety legislation, the chapter discusses selected health and wellness issues facing HR managers and non-managers. In the light of EU initiatives, details on how HR professionals can be more proactive in the area of workplace health, safety and wellness are provided.

Chapter objectives:

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Explain the benefits of a health and wellness strategy
2. Outline the regulatory framework for workplace health and safety
3. Describe some common hazards in the contemporary workplace
4. Describe the components of a workplace wellness programme
5. Explain the role of trade unions and the influence of the environmental movement in creating sustainable and healthy workplaces and local communities
6. Critique management strategies for health and safety in the workplace

Introduction

In Beer's et al 1984 HRM model, it is acknowledged that work systems can have long term consequences for employees' well being.

Management of health and wellness is determined by internal and external factors including, economic costs, government regulations, trade unions, and public opinion.

Sustainable health and safety and HRM

The employer has a duty to maintain a healthy and safe workplace. Health and safety affects elements in the HRM cycle: selection, appraisal, rewards, and training.

Employers, workers and their organizations have changed their approach to health and safety from (a) Traditional - “careless worker” model to (b) HRM - “shared responsibility” model and as far as the trade union are concerned to (c) “employer” responsibility model.

HRM in practice 12.1 Employees going to work even if they are ill. This report (p. 394) draws attention to ‘sickness presenteeism’, which may be more harmful than absenteeism, refers to employees going into work when they are ill.

Importance of health, safety and wellness

There are strong economic, legal, psychological and moral reasons why managers should take health and safety seriously.

Economic reasons for ensuring safe workplace: reduces accidents, insurance, improves employee relations, and facilitates employee commitment to quality goals.

Employees have a **legal right** to work in a safe and healthy environment.

A healthy workplace and one that promotes wellness can have a strong positive affect on the **psychological contract**.

It is pointed out those whom contribute to the causation of work-related diseases and do so knowingly can be held to be **morally responsible** for their action.

Study tip: To examine the economic versus the moral arguments, view part of the film, Erin Brockovich (2000), which is based on a true story. In the film, Brockovich (played by Julia Roberts), a legal assistant, discovers that a U.S. power utility is illegally dumping cancer-causing

chemicals into an unlined pond, causing high rates of cancer and other diseases in the local community.

After viewing extracts from the film, in a study group have members of the peer group to represent the company and trade unions or a community action group. Debate questions such as: Why are successful prosecutions of 'corporate manslaughter' so rare? Are attitudes to health and safety changing? Do corporations transfer hazardous operations to regions with less stringent health and safety standards? What lessons from the film are there for HRM? Do international trade deals (e.g., TTIP) potentially undermine health and safety?

HRM and globalization 12.1: The social construction of workplace injury in North America
This example (p. 397) discusses how media misrepresentation of workplace injuries can blind managers to hazardous working conditions and obscure radical solutions.

Study tip: Go back to the HRM goal of employee 'commitment' and the rhetoric v. reality debate on the HRM model.

Workplace health and safety issues

Seven specific health and safety hazards are discussed in the chapter:

1. Sick building syndrome - ill health linked to building design.
2. Workplace stress - can be costly to both the individual employee and the employer. Common symptoms of workplace-related stress (see **Figure 12.1, p. 399**).

HRM in practice 12.2 Work-related stress

This report (p. 402) draws attention to recent research conducted on work-related stress and ways to manage it.

Harassment (sexual and racial) can result in an employment-related detriment to the employee. Do consider linking harassment to employee relations (Chapter 10).

3. Workplace violence – for many front-line employees, violence from customers, clients, patients and passengers, for example, is a critical safety issue. Research suggests that much workplace violence goes unrecorded.
4. Workplace bullying – is described as the 'silent epidemic'. The definitions of workplace bullying incorporate several inappropriate and dysfunctional behaviours. However, there is little OHS legislation that specifically deals with workplace bullying.

5. Alcohol (and drug) abuse - is both a health and safety problem and a job performance problem. The mandatory testing of employees has implications for employee relations and human rights.
6. Smoking - Many work organizations have introduced policies prohibiting smoking in the workplace to avoid legal action due to secondary smoke (see Practising HRM activity on Smoking Cessation Policies, available on the Online Resource Centre).

HRM in practice 12.3 Juggling work and life

This report (p. 407) draws attention to the difficulties of maintaining a good work-life balance.

Study tip: At this point you may wish to examine the ethical stakes associated with health and wellness. See Noeleen Doherty and Shaun Tyson's chapter, 'HRM and employee well-being: raising the ethical stakes' (pp. 102-115), in D. Winstanley and J. Woodall's (eds.) *Ethical Issues in Contemporary Human Resource Management*, Basingstoke: Palgrave (2000). Doherty and Tyson show how a heightened awareness of mental ill-health in knowledge-based workplaces has brought managers into an ethical dilemma.

Also, in both Britain and North America there are many illustrative examples and case law of harassment at work to help you illustrate the legal responsibility of the employer to provide a harassment free workplace.

7. AIDS - Mandatory testing raises human rights issues and might affect recruitment and selection policies. Few employers have AID-specific policies.

Workplace wellness

Workplace wellness programmes typically focus on individual behaviour and on the programmes promoting individual life-style change – smoking, binge-drinking, poor diet and lack of exercise, for example.

Eleven initiatives e.g., employee assistance programme, are listed.

Paradox in workplace health and wellness

We use the model, Figure 13.7, in Chapter 13 to illustrate paradox and tension around health, safety and wellness. For example, the economic cost of occupational health, safety and wellness is a 'double-edged sword'. Safety and wellness interventions that protect an organization's 'human assets' can reduce

the organization's financial assets. Health, safety and wellness programmes can also improve organizational performance by reducing costs associated with accidents, etc.

Engaging in critical thinking

Chapter case study: The City of Kamloops

This case examines the benefits and challenges of introducing a wellness programme in a public sector organization.

Tip to students: To answer this question, students should examine OHS issues examined in the chapter and how a wellness programme can mitigate against work-related stress and concomitantly have positive long-term consequences of HR outcomes.

Reflective question/essay question

How do occupational health and safety issues affect the HRM function?

Tip to students: To answer this question, students may wish to revisit the HRM activities listed in Chapter 1 and reflect upon key HR activities and the long-term consequences of HR outcomes. For example, a reward system may be designed to reduce accidents. The question of costs versus organizational performance should also be examined.