

OBESITY AND THE WORKPLACE

Obesity is known to be a primarily public health issue. It is a health care issue that has clear implications for the workplace. It has already been established that as a consequence of obesity, many workers incur high medical costs. Many persons suffer from related health issues such as hypertension and diabetes. The workplace is directly impacted upon as high incidence of absenteeism is recorded. As the problem of obesity escalates, it requires a heightened public education awareness response, so as to draw attention to its devastating consequences.

In the United Kingdom and the United States of America, the impact of obesity on workplaces is startling. In 2011 a total of 18 million sick days lost through obesity at an estimated cost of £3.7 billion. In the USA it is currently costing the Federal Government \$147 billion annually to fight the problem of obesity. Research released by Duke University in 2010, detailed the annual cost to employers for obesity amongst full time employees at \$ 73.1 million. These are alarming figures, which justify the claim that both the USA and the UK are experiencing an obesity epidemic. Based on observation, it would seem that Barbados is quickly moving in this direction. The picture painted by Fitzroy J. Henry in an editorial captioned, 'New Strategies Needed to Fight Obesity in the Caribbean,' indicated that half of the Caribbean adult population is overweight. The implications here are the working population is severely affected. This therefore has serious implications for the productivity of the labour force.

Statistics presented by Dr. Hennis, Head of the Chronic Disease Research Centre in Barbados, clearly highlighted the magnitude of the problem of obesity on the island. He cited that of 190,000 Barbadians age 20 years and older, 90,000 were overweight. Findings from research completed by the Barbados Food Consumption and Anthropometric Surveys (BFCAS 2000), revealed that the prevalence of overweight (pre-obesity) and obesity among adult Barbadians to be 55.8% in men and 63.8% in women.

Among young adults (18-29 years), the prevalence of overweight and obesity was nearly 30% in young men and over 50% in young women.

There is no secret that the life style of Americans is a major contributing factor to obesity in the USA. Western societies have come to embrace this life style, and so fast food diets and consumption of foods with saturated fats and carbonated sodas that are full of sugar, have become the norm. Individual are expected to take responsibility for their health status, and so they should institute life style changes to counter the problem of obesity. To simply blame their obesity on being a heredity factor is a lame excuse.

Obesity presents a problem in the workplace that ought to concern employers. There is the loss of man hours due to illness, plus the cost of the payment of additional wages or salaries for temporary replacement staff for employees who are on sick leave. As some employees become overweight, the cost to employers may be extended in some ways. For example, in an office setting it may be necessary to upgrade the furniture to accommodate the weight of individuals. Recognizing that obesity is becoming an imposing concern, employers need to examine the role they can play in helping workers to manage this condition. Employers should encourage their employees to have annual medical checkups. This could be part of a benefit package offered to employees. Those businesses which offer tenders for providing restaurant services on their premises, should insist on the serving of health foods.

A case can be presented that the operations in most workplaces contribute to the growing problem of obesity amongst workers. As contentious as it may seem, the facts are there to support this claim. Employers place excessive demands on their employees to meet deadlines and targets. In some instances the take home pay of employees is tied to their productivity. In responding to this pressure, many workers do not follow a healthy diet. They consume high levels of fast and junk foods. Many sit at their work stations or even drive and eat. After a long day, they travel

home, eat and sleep. The lack of exercise results in these individuals packing on the pounds.

A possible remedy to reducing the condition of obesity would be to avoid the routine practice of work, eating and sleeping. It is to be reiterated that while it is important to eat, it is all about healthy eating. Included in the plan must be a schedule of regular exercise. In a world where people are becoming very conscious about their physical appearance, those who are obese should be aware that this state can lead to prejudice and discrimination in the workplace, lower self-esteem and fewer job opportunities.

Those who tend to want to discriminate against overweight or obese colleagues in the workplace, usually hold the opinion that such persons are unproductive and lazy. This may far from being the case. To the contrary, some supposedly slimmer and energetic people can be less productive. Based on the theory, it cannot be ignored that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors play a significant part in one's motivation. Obesity as a workplace issue is unlikely to go away anytime soon, so apart from accepting this, the best approach to be adopted is to undertake to identify ways of helping employees to manage this problem. The promotion of wellness programme is a strategy that should be pursued in workplace. This might require individual to give up personal and social habits. Whilst the introduction of wellness programmes may be appropriate, employers have to be cautious against having the charge levied against them of invading the privacy of its employees.

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