A semi-monthly column on emerging topics related to healthy workplaces

**Issue #47: Commuting and work – what contributes to employees’ risky commuting safety behaviors and what can be done about it?**

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Commuting constitutes an essential aspect of the daily lives of the majority of working adults. Of the 139 million civilians employed in the United States, approximately 136 million commute to work. The vast majority commutes by private vehicle alone, often spending upwards of 50 minutes traveling to and from their workplace. The time spent commuting skyrockets for people who work in urbanized areas, where traffic congestion is greater.

Recent statistics for nation-wide traffic accidents reveal that in 2009 there were 5.5 million accidents, with approximately 76% of these occurring during the standard Monday-Friday work week. Nearly 11% of accidents occurred during standard morning commute times (i.e., 6-9am), and a startling 20% occurring during standard evening commute times (i.e., 3-6pm). What’s more, nationally, 3,328 people were killed in distraction-affected crashes in 2012; additionally, distracted driving-related accidents resulted in an estimated 421,000 people injured.

In addition to stress from the commute itself, people who feel stressed at work may also experience spillover from work-related issues during the commute home. Both of these sources of stress may increase our susceptibility to accidents, resulting in healthcare costs and lost workdays. Indeed, research has shown that on days when employees experience more job strain, they engage in more work-related rumination during the commute, impacting their driving safety. Furthermore, on days when people are experiencing a stressful commute, engaging in rumination about negative experiences at work can lead them to engage in riskier commuting safety behaviors by committing more driving violations on the road.

Suggestions for employers on how to reduce negative spillover of work stress into the commute home

Clearly, it is important to prevent negative spillover of job strain and work-related rumination into the commute home to help assure safe driving while on the road. However, there are few studies that examine effective practices for employers and employees on this topic. One possible approach is positive reflection about the day’s experiences at the end of the work shift. In one study of work stress solutions, positive reflection led to reduced stress and improved health of employees. If employees were given instruction and the opportunity to reflect positively on their workday prior to leaving work, they might ruminate less on the commute home and subsequently drive more safely.

More broadly, primary prevention of job stress through improved work organization could be expected to reduce the negative impact of daily job experiences. For example, it could be that certain aspects of the job create stress and strain for employees, and these could cause employees to ruminate negatively about their job and work experiences. Job stressors could be reduced through job redesign, by adding variety, learning opportunities, social interaction, and
greater autonomy in decision making. These job quality improvements could reduce stress and strain, thereby reducing spillover into the commute.

Furthermore, organizations could allow their employees more flexible working times to accommodate employees’ non-work schedules. This may reduce time-pressure that employee’s feel that could be contributing to stress and work-related rumination during their commutes from work to home.

References


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