

CPH News and Views

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?

Contributed By: Katrina A. Burch, M.A., Doctoral Student, Industrial/Organizational Psychology, University of Connecticut

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 work¹. The vast majority commutes by private vehicle alone, often spending upwards of 50 minutes traveling to and from their workplace². 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 week⁴. 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)⁴. 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 injured⁵.

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 safety³. 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 road³. In effect, work stress impacts employees' safety both *inside* and *outside* the workplace.

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 employees⁶. 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 employees feel that could be contributing to stress and work-related rumination during their commutes from work to home.

References

1. US Census Bureau. (2009). *Commuting to work by state*. Retrieved November 14, 2012, from www.census.gov/compendia/statab.
2. US Census Data. (2009). *Roadway congestion by urbanized area: 2009*. Retrieved November 14, 2012, from www.census.gov/compendia/statab.
3. Burch, K.A. (2015). *Exploring the relationship between commuting stress, job strain, and safety behaviors while commuting: The dual role of work-related rumination*. (Master's Thesis). Available from DigitalCommons. (Paper 864).
4. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (2009). *Traffic safety facts 2009* (DOT HS 811 402). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Transportation.
5. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and U.S. Department of Transportation. (n.d.). *What is Distracted Driving? Key Facts and Statistics*. Retrieved from: <http://www.distraction.gov/content/get-the-facts/facts-and-statistics.html>.
6. Bono, J.E., Glomb, T.M., Shen, W., Kim, E., & Koch, A.J. (2013). Building positive resources: Effects of positive events and positive reflection on work stress and health. *Academy of Management Journal*, 56(6), 1601-1627.
7. Wrzesniewski, A., & Dutton, J.E. (2001). Crafting a job: Revisioning employees as active crafters of their work. *Academy of Management Review*, 26, 179-201.

Katrina Burch is a PhD Candidate in Industrial and Organizational Psychology at the University of Connecticut Storrs. Katrina's research interests are in commuting as a boundary between the work and home domains, as well as workplace safety climate and safety behaviors.



CPH-NEW is a Center for Excellence to Promote a Healthier Workforce of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. CPH-News & Views is a semi-monthly column written by Center researchers on emerging topics related to healthy workplaces. These comments reflect thoughts of the individual researchers and do not represent conclusive research summaries, nor do they necessarily reflect a consensus among all Center personnel.

We welcome your responses and discussion. Please send all questions and comments to CPHNEW@uml.edu.