

Mental Health in the Manufacturing Industry: Can Employers Make Workplace Welcoming, Supportive?

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May is Mental Health Awareness Month in the United States. June is Men's Health Month. For manufacturers competing for employees, these important topics often are overlooked.

Manufacturing is known as a male-dominated industry. Studies have shown that men are less likely to speak up about their mental health. One [study](#) published by the journal *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* showed that mental health issues are 36 percent more prevalent in manufacturing employees than the national average.

In 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that 31 percent of U.S. adults reported struggling with mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. The CDC also reported that over one-third of employees reported suffering from anxiety or depressive disorder.

Studies show that employees in the manufacturing industry also report low levels of support from their coworkers and supervisors. Manufacturing employees often are tasked with assignments that require focus and precision. Studies have shown that two of the most significant stressors in the manufacturing industry relate to meeting production goals and the variable shift in schedules. Moreover, noise from machinery, long hours indoors, and the lack of opportunity for social interaction can add to employee stress levels.

As manufacturers compete against other industries for valuable candidates, adoption of methods to improve employee well-being could improve employee retention and strengthen recruitment efforts. Following are some suggestions for how manufacturers can improve employee well-being in the workplace:

- **Take a survey:** Manufacturers can ask employees for feedback on ways to improve the workplace culture or workflow to foster an environment that is conducive to employee well-being. Of course, if you conduct a survey, employees will expect you to pay attention to the survey results and take action where appropriate. Asking for employee input but not listening is worse than not asking at all.
- **Give wellness initiatives:** Manufacturers should strive to celebrate employee achievement and hard work. Some wellness initiatives can include information about how employees can incorporate mindfulness practices into the workday, helpful stretches employees can do during their breaks, or a reward program for achieving wellness goals that the employer has set.
- **Work rotation:** Consider implementing a regular job rotation schedule so employees have more variety in their work. This can take the form of employees switching roles within their job duties. This will keep employees engaged and focused. This also allows employees to learn other roles and gain new responsibilities, which can help employee

well-being. Keep in mind that job rotation programs may trigger accommodation obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or similar state laws.

- *Additional or longer breaks:* If feasible, provide your employees with another break, or longer breaks, throughout the workday. While time is money in manufacturing, permitting employees to step away from their workstations more often can help avoid employee burnout. Employers should be mindful of state meal and rest break laws and wage and hour laws to ensure that employees are properly keeping track of their breaks for compliance reasons.

These suggestions have cost implications, so manufacturers should carefully consider the relative costs and benefits before adopting any change to current practices.

While proactively addressing employee well-being can be good for business and employees, employers should be mindful of the duties and protections that exist once they are on notice of an employee mental health or other disability under the ADA and applicable state law. Manufacturers should familiarize themselves with the relevant laws for the states in which they operate. Supervisors should also be trained to engage human resources when any employee mental health or disability issue arises.

If you are interested in learning more about ways to proactively address employee well-being, or your obligations once an issue presents itself, please contact your Jackson Lewis attorney or our Manufacturing Industry Group.

(Summer Associate Lovia Ofori-Ampofo contributed to this article.)

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