# Study unit 11: EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND SAFETY

# Introduction

Organizations are concerned about employees’ health and safety while they are at work. Employee health and safety boosts employees’ morale and loyalty. Managers realize that a healthy employee is a productive one.

Employee health refers to the physical, social and psychological wellbeing of employees.

Safety refers to activities undertaken to safeguard employees from dangerous work practices that may be faced at work. Therefore, safe practices can lead to a state of health among employees.

Security refers to activities undertaken to ensure that employees are protected at the work place.

# Learning Outcomes of Study Unit 11

By the end of this topic you should be able to:

11.1Distinguish between employee health and safety.

11.2 Justify the rationale for employee health and safety programs in any given organization.

11.3 Explain the various conditions of work that are likely to affect the health of employees in the organization.

11.4 Categorize the major causes of accidents at the work place.

11.5 Explain the strategies that can be used in reducing accidents

11.6 Explain the impact of work stress on employee health.

## 11.2 Rationale for employee Health and Safety

An organisation whose management has managed to put in place and maintain desirable physical, social and psychological conditions can be assured of a number of benefits. They include the following;

1. Safety and health practices and programs help to maintain an environment that facilitates efficient employee productivity

2. Creation of morale among employees of an organization which in turn affects the quantity and quality of a firm’s products and services positively, besides creation of favourable occupational attitudes amongst such employees

3. The public image of a firm will also be improved for the better if systematic employee health and safety programs have established and modified over time. E.g. highly qualified personnel will be willing to work for such a firm or maintenance of a reasonable market share

4. The employee will as well be considered to be operating with in law if the working environment facilitates employee health and safety during their day to day activities that are aimed at achieving the goals and objectives of a firm

5. An organisation will also be assured of less work stoppage if any, that are normally caused by accidents and illness among employees. This implies that activities will be accomplished in time there by maintaining the profitability base of such a firm among other advantages

6. Unnecessary costs that may negatively affect the budget of a firm are also minimized in case of systematic employee health and safety measures at the work place. Such costs may be in terms of replacement of injured employees, compensation, investigations, replacement of damaged equipment’s and legal suits among others

7. Good employee safety and health measures can as well be useful tool towards better employer-employee relations with in an organisation. A mutual employer-employee relationship is advantageous to firms in a number of ways such as effective flow of information, timely grievance and conflict handling etc.

8. Well established health and safety measures help to reduce the rate at which employees enter and leave the organisation. I e a stable work force is established implying that several programs of the organisation can be carried out with less or no interruptions.

# 11.3 Explain the various conditions of work that are likely to affect the health of employees in the organization.

**Employee Health**

Employee health can be understood by examining conditions of the work in the organization. Conditions of work can be categorized as; physical, chemical, biological, temporal and psychological.

**1. Physical conditions**

The physical working environment includes location and design of the building, parking features, amount of light and noise coming into the work place.

a) The design and size of the office

The design and size of the office(s) affects employees’ job satisfaction and productivity. For example the layout of offices can affect the behavior of managers who rely on spontaneous meetings with other managers as a way of obtaining information or solving problems.

b) Noise

Noise in the work environment makes employees irritable and nervous. It interferes with sleep and produces physiological defects like deafness. Certain loudness levels can be threatening to hearing. Hearing loss is a recognized job hazard for workers like airport personnel. People who work in extremely noisy environments are aggressive, destructive and irritable compared to those who work in quieter environments.

c) Illumination

Continued exposure to inadequate light while reading or performing detailed operations can be harmful to one’s sight. Research shows that inadequate lighting is a source of stress and constant exposure to dim light can have a negative impact on job performance. A suitable arrangement for light is to uniformly be distributed throughout the entire work area.

d) Temperature and Humidity

Some people are happier and more hardworking in cold weather whereas others prefer hot weather. Studies have shown that uncomfortable temperature and humidity levels can influence the quality and quantity of work performed. Production can slow down under extremely hot conditions.

e) Colour

In industry, colour can provide a pleasant working environment and can aid with safety e.g. colour can be used in factories as a coding device that is fire equipment can be yellow while danger areas can be red. This allows for such equipments and areas to be quickly identified.

**2. Biological conditions**

Biological agents that may be found in the working environment include bacteria, parasites, viruses and other parasites. These may thrive in the working environment if the conditions prevailing in that environment are conducive for their survival. Some workers may be exposed to certain diseases through foods taken at the place of work.

**3. Chemical conditions**

In many organizations, workers handle potentially dangerous, toxic substances in the course of doing their work i.e. the degree of risk of handling any substance will normally depend on the magnitude of the exposure to that substance.

**4. Temporal conditions**

These can be described in terms of hours of work and rest pauses.

*a) Hours of work*

The number of hours worked daily or weekly and the amount of rest allowed during working hours are potential sources of improved satisfaction and productivity of employees. Studies have demonstrated that the longer the workday, the lower the actual production per hour. Employees adjust longer hours by working at a slower rate.

Work schedules that can be adopted by managers;

* The four day work week

One way to alter the workload significantly is to reduce it to only four days. This usually involves 4 days at 10 hours a day. Reports from companies that have adopted a 4 day workweek have indicated improved job satisfaction, productivity as well as reduced absenteeism.

* Flexible working hours

A more radical change in work scheduling is to let employees decide for themselves when they will be available for work on a particular day. Industrial psychologists have found out that workers may not change their habits so much under flex-time. However, employees feel that having choices of when to arrive and leave enhances their sense of personal freedom.

Flexible working hours seem to be appropriate for jobs like research. In assembly line work flex-time may be difficult to implement because of a high degree of interdependence among the workers (long linked technology).

* Flex time can also be described in terms of shift work. Shift work is also a temporal condition that affects many employees in terms of work period i.e. day and night. Many companies are in operation more than 8 hours a day (some operate around the clock e.g. petrol companies, hospitals, mass media firms, police, fire fighting departments).

Employees must work in any of the 3 shifts e.g. 7.30am-3 pm, 3pm-11pm and 11 pm-7.00am. Some companies assign individuals one shift as a permanent basis, while others rotate workers to different shifts or between shifts.

Research has indicated that some workers are less productive on the night shift than on the day shift. In addition, workers in the night are prone to make more errors, which may cause serious accidents. Night shifts also produce physical and psychological defects like fatigue and emotional exhaustion. Studies have indicated that permanent part time employees may accomplish as much as much or more than their full time colleagues.

*b) Rest pauses*

The most urgent reason for companies to provide rest pauses or breaks is that employees take rests whether or not they are offered. When breaks are authorized, unauthorized breaks decline although they do not disappear altogether like tardiness. The potential benefits of formal rest pauses include increased morale, reduced fatigue and boredom, improved attitudes of workers towards the employer. When a rest program is introduced, workers may feel that it is an expression that management has concern for employees.

**5. Psychological conditions**

These include factors that relate to the nature of the job itself and the impact it has on the workers’ performance. Jobs designed to be simple that they make no demands on the workers’ intelligence or need for achievement result in boredom, monotony, fatigue and less efficient production. Employees holding such jobs normally report a higher level of anxiety and irritability.

Simplified and repetitive jobs or work can lead to a deterioration of the mental function e.g. such workers are prone to absent mindedness and forgetfulness. In assembly line work, personal value and meaningfulness of work are destroyed.

## 11.4 Categorize the major causes of accidents at the work place

**Employee Safety**

Every employer is required to prepare and keep an up-to-date written statement of a safety policy. Employee safety programs are a vital component of Human Resources Management.

Managers are concerned about employee safety because they realize that safety makes an employee more productive and without safety programs, employers incur costs through workers’ compensation, medical costs and at times industrial unrests.

Employee safety is attained when accidents are prevented. Accidents prevention and safety have become necessary because the modern industrial workers are subject to mechanical, electrical, chemical and radiation hazards arising out of advancement in technology.

**Causes of accidents**

The human element seems to be responsible for most accidents that occur in organizations. Factors like the emotional state and attitudes play a big part in causing accidents. However, conditions of work like the physical environment and the nature of the industry can also contribute to the occurrence of accidents as explained below;

*Conditions in the work environment*

These include the physical work environment, hours of work, lighting, temperature, equipment design etc.

1. The physical environment, this may have modern technology which makes fresh demands on the workers’ ability or potential. The process of empowering workers to take on new technology can be a source of accidents.

2. Hours of work, the longer the work day, the more employees are vulnerable to accidents. Accidents occur because workers are likely to be tired.

3. Lighting, good lighting can lead to reduced accident rates. Accidents are higher in plants which continue production in poorly lit work rooms.

4. Temperature, accidents increase when temperature varies and particularly when it is very cold or very hot. Research suggests that older workers are affected by temperature extremes than their young counterparts.

5. Equipment design, the design of equipment used on the job has been found to contribute to accidents. Poor placement of switches and other contacts can lead to accidents e.g. locating a top button where it is difficult to reach can have grave consequences if a machine must shut down immediately that is to say if the operator is short yet the switch is at a far distance.

6. Lack of maintenance of machines, where the organization does not carry out regular maintenance checks on machines, they are likely to be faulty and thus making workers vulnerable to accidents that these machines may cause.

7. Work overload or work under load, work overload is where employees are given work that is beyond their stipulated work. They work over and above their designation that is they are given too many tasks to handle. This causes a lot of fatigue to employees as they become more tired thus becoming susceptible to accidents. Work under load is vice versa where by employees have less tasks to handle and in so doing their work becomes monotonous and they find themselves causing accidents because they do not require a lot of thinking on the job.

*Personal or Human factors*

1. Drug abuse, employees with a drinking of alcohol or drug problem are more likely to be involved in accidents than employees without that problem. This is so because they are carried away by the drugs end up doing things carelessly thus causing accidents.

2. Health status / state of health, research evidence has shown that employees with poor health tend to be highly susceptible to accidents. One physical defect relating to accidents is poor vision; tests have shown that people who have fewer accidents generally have better vision. Also disease s like epilepsy where an employee gets an attack, they may end up causing accidents.

3. Fatigue, this comes as a result of being very tired. It causes a decline in production and an increase in accidents. In a 10 hour workday a sharp rise in accidents in the last 2 hours has been reported presumably because of fatigue e.g. in heavy industries.

4. Cognitive ability, studies suggest that intelligence is related to accident free behavior. However, intelligence is related to certain kinds of work for example those requiring a high degree of judgment as opposed to repetitive manual jobs. Cognitive activities like judgment, information processing and perception are involved in the performance of many types of jobs. Failure in cognitive function can lead to hazardous eventualities.

5. Work experience, this comes with the years one has spent on the job. A lower level of employee on-the job experience tends to result in high accident rates. Studies have indicated a decrease in accidents from the beginning of a new job to two years later.

## 11.5 Explain the strategies that can be used in reducing accidents

*Health and Safety Management*

1. Organizations should start up health and safety committees in places of work to handle health and safety matters especially in industries which are very prone to accidents. The committees act as coordinators of safety and health activities.

2. Management should encourage an open door policy which encourages workers to report incidences that are likely to lead to occupational accidents and diseases. This will encourage safety representatives to consult with employees on matters affecting their health and safety.

3. There is need for regular maintenance tests to check on the conditions of equipment and also the premises. This involves work place inspections where inspectors point out conditions or practices that appear to be hazardous.

4. Recognizing outstanding achievement of employees who have engaged in safe work practices. This can be done by rewarding them thus motivating them to promote safety and health.

5. Reporting and analyzing accident trends; this involves keeping records and compiling a summary of work related injuries and illnesses. This will determine the factors contributing to the accidents and may reveal what corrections are needed to prevent them from happening again. The best way to develop preventative and protective measures in future is to find out what went wrong in the past such that it can be avoided thereafter.

6. Provide protective wears and make sure that employees use protective gears/gadgets when necessary.

7. Management should communicate to employees. They should tell employees the specific rules and regulations concerning safe work practices and it can be done through the supervisors, bulletins, notice boards and employee handbooks i.e. safety rules should be emphasized in regular meetings and manuals of standard operating procedures.

8. There is need for comprehensive safety training for new entrants/recruits. Employers must engage in safety training through new employee orientations and therefore discipline employees for failing to comply with safety rules.

9. Encourage employee participation in all aspects of the organization’s safety programs. That is to say in jointly setting safety standards with management, involvement in designing and implementing special safety training programs, inclusion in accident investigation and involvement in establishing safety incentives and rewards.

10. Potentially dangerous areas should be marked and measures taken such that workers know what could happen or what they must do before they enter such areas.

11. Food at the work place should only be provided in consideration of hygiene and safety.

12. It is important to avoid stress causing work situations because a stressed person is likely to cause accidents.

11.6 Explain the impact of work stress on employee health.

Stress – the responses our bodies and minds have to the demands placed on them – is a normal part of life and a normal part of any job. It is generally believed that some stress is okay (sometimes referred to as "challenge” or "positive stress") but when stress occurs in amounts that you cannot handle, both mental and physical changes may occur.

Without stress, we wouldn’t meet deadlines, strive to hit sales or production targets, or line up new clients. Meeting the demands and challenges of a job is part of what makes work interesting and satisfying, and it’s often what allows people to develop new skills and advance in their careers. In the workplace, we regularly experience stress-causing situations, react to them with heightened tension, and then return to a more relaxed state when the crisis, big or small, is resolved. However, problems occur when stress is so overwhelming or constant that the tension never abates and we never get to relax. When stress crosses the line from normal to excessive, it can trigger physical and emotional responses that are harmful to employees and businesses alike. And unfortunately, for many people “stress” has become synonymous with “work.”

**Signs and symptoms of stress**

There are many different signs and symptoms that can indicate when someone is having difficulty coping with the amount of stress they are experiencing:

**Physical:** headaches, grinding teeth, clenched jaws, chest pain, shortness of breath, pounding heart, high blood pressure, muscle aches, indigestion, constipation or diarrhea, increased perspiration, fatigue, insomnia, frequent illness

**Psychosocial:** anxiety, irritability, sadness, defensiveness, anger, mood swings, hypersensitivity, apathy, depression, slowed thinking or racing thoughts; feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, or of being trapped

**Behavioral:** overeating or loss of appetite, impatience, quickness to argue, procrastination, increased use of alcohol or drugs, increased smoking, withdrawal or isolation from others, neglect of responsibility, poor job performance, poor personal hygiene, change in religious practices, change in close family relationships

**Causes of Stress**

In general, the combination of high demands in a job and a low amount of control over the situation can lead to stress. Stress in the workplace can have many origins or come from one single event. It can impact on both employees and employers alike.

1. Role in the organization; role conflict (a disparity exists between job requirements or job demands and employee’s values and expectations, multiple supervisors/managers), role ambiguity (lack of clarity about responsibilities, expectations, etc)

2. Career development; problems of career development such as when an employee fails to receive an anticipated promotion may lead to stress. Also if careers aspirations are not satisfied the resulting frustration can lead to stress. Other factors are under/over-promotion (consideration for level of competence), job security (fear of redundancy either from economy, or a lack of tasks or work to do), career development opportunities, overall job satisfaction, etc.

3. Level of responsibility; taking responsibility for subordinates may be a source of stress for some managers/supervisors. Responsibilities like evaluating employees for salary, promotion or termination decisions or managing their outputs on a daily basis can lead to stress.

4. Individual characteristics; according to scholars, differences in personality and coping style of the worker are most important factors in predicting job stress although what is stressful for one person may not be a problem for another.

5. Working conditions; these constitute the physical environment in which one is required to work and include poor lighting, noise and overcrowding, poor air quality, health and safety risks (heavy equipment, toxic chemicals).

6. Interpersonal relationships; distant, uncommunicative supervisors, poor performance from subordinates, office politics, competition, and other conflicts among staff, bullying or harassment, problems caused by excessive time away from family.

7. Nature of the job; work overload or under load, tedious or meaningless tasks, long hours and low pay, infrequent rest breaks, unreasonable performance demands. Some jobs are stressful by definition because they’re physically dangerous (such as firefighting or criminal justice), involve matters of life and death (emergency functions), or are psychologically demanding (social work, teaching).

8. Organizational practices; unclear responsibilities or expectations, conflicting job demands, multiple supervisors, lack of autonomy or participation in decision-making, inefficient communication patterns, lack of family-friendly policies.

9. Workplace change; fear of layoff, frequent personnel turnover, lack of preparation for technological changes, poor chances for advancement or promotion, tensions brought about by greater workplace diversity.

**Stress Management**

Stress can be managed at 2 levels i.e. individual and organizational levels

***1. Organizational Level/ Work specific strategies***

a) During selection, management must ensure that an employee’s abilities match the requirements of the job

b) Improved organizational communication

c) Make use of a goal setting program to clarify job responsibilities and provide clear performance objectives.

d) Job redesign to increase challenge or reduce the work load and give employees opportunity to participate in decisions

e) Restrict meetings; some meetings are difficult to avoid because they are essential to work performance but others are wasteful so time spent in such meetings should be reduced.

f) Delegation; management should allow subordinates more autonomy to decide on matters directly affecting them and their work.

g) Introduce free counseling services

h) Make use of alternative work arrangements for example working in shifts, part time work, the four day work week, telecommuting, etc.

***2. Individual level***

a) Social support (accepting support from others); having someone (a friend, workmate or family) to talk to provides an outlet when stress levels become excessive.

b) Keep a journal; this puts things into perspective. It should help you identify your concerns and establish a plan for moving forward. You may;

* List the situations that produce stress in your life
* Describe how you cope with each type of stress
* Evaluate your responses i.e. are they productive, appropriate, healthy?

c) Take a break; take some time off your work to calm down. In this time you could read a magazine, pray, play with a pet, listen to music or develop a hobby for this time like reading a novel.

d) Nurturing yourself; taking care of your body, mind and spirit can help reduce feelings of anxiety and frustration that are often related to stress. Practice relaxation techniques, get enough sleep, exercise, avoid/reduce alcohol intake, etc.

e) Time management; get organized and simplify your life so that work does not overwhelm you.

f) Massage Therapy; it can have soothing effects, deep relaxation and can improve processes such as blood circulation.

g) Identify the sources of your stress; knowing what causes your stress can help you cope with it better.

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1. ‘Accidents at the workplace have a lot to do with the individual on the job. Either it is because of a mistake made by an individual like forgetting to do a critical aspect of the job or other factors that are specific to the individual. As such, there is little that an organization can do to stop accidents and ensure safety at the workplace.’ Comment on the above statement.

2. Discuss the view that a stressed employee is more likely to cause accidents than an employee who is not stressed. In your discussion, recommend ways of managing stress both at individual and organizational level.