

A Guide to

Managing Excessive Job Demand

CSRA
CONSTRUCTION
SAFETY RESEARCH ALLIANCE

ABOUT
THIS GUIDE

Research shows that excessive job demands cause significant mental health challenges for construction workers. Although paying people more, changing how work is contracted, and hiring more people may deliver the highest positive impact, these types of changes can be prohibitively expensive. Therefore, we should seek to affect change in small but productive steps that enhance wellbeing within the constraints of business.

This guidance is based on the belief that there is a hierarchy of actions for addressing stressors. While some actions can be instituted right away, more impactful changes may take time. This is best described as a staircase where the pursuit of excellence requires one step at a time and the long-term vision of reaching an aspirational goal. Just like a staircase, we cannot simply leap to the highest step. Instead, we must build incremental successes. These smaller, gradual changes can help foster a positive culture around mental health, encouraging the workforce to open up about their well-being and demonstrating that management is committed to making investments that lead to long-term change.







ABOUT
JOB DEMAND

This guidance addresses a pervasive stressor within our industry: excessive job demand. Job demand is the amount of physical (e.g., heavy manual labor, difficult working conditions), psychological (e.g., job insecurity, multi-tasking), and social (e.g., interpersonal conflicts, lack of control) energy that an individual must expend to complete a task at work. Job demands cannot be removed from work because every job requires energy. However, in many contexts, the cumulative energy required can be exceed the mental and physical capacity of an employee, leading to burnout and emotional exhaustion. If these issues are pervasive, it can result is a disengaged workforce, higher absenteeism, and long-term mental health problems.

Managing excessive job demand may be daunting and seem challenging to address. However, there are very compelling reasons to act. For example, a recent CSRA study revealed that workers perceive excessive job demand as one of the greatest stressors at work, outweighing other factors like discrimination, bullying, and harassment. This was consistent across major ethnic groups, age groups, trades, and sectors. Since excessive job demand is a stressor within the control of the employer, organizations have an ethical responsibility to identify and address known issues.





CAUSE 1

FAST PACED AND UNREALISTIC TIMELINES

Fast and unrealistic timelines in construction are driven by factors like client demands, financial constraints, and project-specific regulations. Delays further exacerbate schedule pressures, leading to significant physical and mental strain. CSRA conducted focus groups with frontline workers that found that workers are less concerned about increased workloads and more about the tight deadlines imposed on them.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS:

Fundamental

1 Communicating Workload and Setting Expectations

Clear expectations and well-defined goals reduce employee stress and improve job satisfaction. Often, these expectations are not inherently understood by all parties involved, making it crucial to articulate them clearly. Open communication channels ensure feedback and performance alignment, fostering a cohesive work environment.

Advanced

2 Building Better Float into Schedules

Adding requisite float to project schedules accommodates rework and improving project outcomes by allowing greater control over timelines. It allows for proactive risk mitigation and grants frontline employees greater autonomy and control over their work. Research shows that construction projects with increased float tend to experience lower stress levels among both frontline workers and supervisors. Organizations should engage with their clients to help establish importance of added float to schedule as it relates to the well-being of the workforce.

Outstanding

3 Involving the Field During the Planning Phase

Involving superintendents and trade partners in the planning phase helps create realistic schedules that match workforce capabilities, reducing the risk of unrealistic timelines and expectations.



CAUSE 2

NON-COHESIVE TEAMS

Non-cohesive teams lead to communication breakdowns, conflicts, and stress, contributing to burnout and emotional exhaustion. This weakens morale, productivity, and safety on construction sites.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS:

Fundamental

1 Team Building Exercises

Many workers express a strong interest in participating in team-building exercises, which can range from group activities to casual lunches that allow colleagues to learn about each other's backgrounds. However, it is crucial to schedule these activities during work hours. While some employees may enjoy after-work gatherings, many others have other priorities and responsibilities. Building community can also help integrate diverse populations.

Advanced

2 Providing Leadership Training for Site Leadership

Poor leadership is often the cause of team issues. Leaders who seem indifferent, set unrealistic goals, or ignore special needs can hurt employee mental health and morale. Effective leadership training can equip site supervisors with the skills necessary to foster a supportive and collaborative work environment. Beyond orientation, new employees should receive experiential learning to reduce reliance on on-the-job training and improve team cohesion from the start.

Outstanding

3 Accountability

Despite its long history, application of discipline in workplace has been inconsistent. To manage future behavioral and attitudinal outcomes within social context, organizations should communicate their philosophy around disciplinary actions. Clear, fair disciplinary policies with transparent examples build trust. Organizations should ensure that employees see discipline as just and necessary, handled discreetly and fairly. Share examples during training of non-compliant behaviors and clearly state how the organization handles such cases. Albeit distasteful, discipline is a key component in managing concerns surrounding poor work culture.



CAUSE 3

LABOR SHORTAGE

Labor shortages increase workloads and stress, leading to burnout and declining morale. This shortage weakens team cohesion, further worsening mental health and job satisfaction.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS:

Fundamental

1 Retention Programs (Prioritize Time-Off to Avoid Burnout)

First and foremost, we must create an environment to retain the existing workforce. Leaders should engage employees to understand their needs and emphasize the importance of using resources (e.g., PTO, counselling) to prevent burnout and maintain well-being. Remember, as younger generations enter the workforce, it is important to capture changing perceptions. Leadership needs to constantly engage with its workforce to understand how it can build their self-esteem. For example, leaders should engage with workforce when possible to effectively communicate how each individual employee is critical to the company's mission.

Advanced

2 Preventing Burnout

Work-life balance is key to well-being. Burnout can cause both short-term and long-term physiological and psychological health issues. Organizations must provide workers with Paid-Time-Off (or equivalent policies) and encourage them to use it.

Outstanding

3 Hiring Strategies and Changing Work Environments

New outreach strategies, including internships and scholarships, are essential for attracting younger generations. It is going to be critical for organizations to adapt work environments appropriately to meet the expectations next generation of workers to ensure a sustainable future workforce.



CAUSE 4

TOUGH LOCATIONS AND ADVERSE ENVIRONMENTS

Working in remote locations in the construction industry can lead to isolation and loneliness, as workers are often far from family and social support networks. Limited access to recreational activities and mental health services exacerbates feelings of stress and anxiety.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS:

Fundamental

1 Combatting Isolation

Organizations must ensure there is reliable internet connection for worker to use to stay connected with their families. On-site leadership presence creates a shared lived experience that can humanize the working environment and promote psychological safety. The experience of being on-site would allow leadership to make targeted and tailored recommendations around work-life balance challenges facing their workforce. From hosting events after work to providing better living accommodations, outreach of this nature can go a long way.

Advanced

2 Enhancing Compensation

Offering tailored compensation packages that address unique work challenges, such as remote locations and weather-related disruptions, can significantly boost morale and financial stability. Remote location pay acknowledges the difficulties of working in isolated environments, while guaranteed weather pay or pre-planned professional development during downtime ensures workers in industries like construction maintain financial security and productivity. These targeted strategies enhance overall job satisfaction and reduce unnecessary strain on employees.

Outstanding

3 Access to Physiological and Psychological Health Services

Offering on-site or easy-to-access services like medical check-ups, injury rehabilitation, counseling, and stress management programs can help reduce injuries, lower stress, and build a healthier workforce. These services not only address immediate health concerns but also contribute to long-term well-being, leading to improved performance, safety, and job satisfaction.



CAUSE 5

JOB INSECURITY

The constant uncertainty of future jobs and financial instability fosters ongoing stress, affecting focus, productivity, and job performance. Job insecurity also strains personal relationships and limits access to health benefits, worsening mental health and overall well-being.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS:

Fundamental

1 Establishing Clarity

Transparent communication about upcoming opportunities, potential gaps, and unknowns can help manage expectations. Honest updates can build trust, reduce anxiety, and prepare workers to handle job uncertainty with greater confidence. Additionally, workers can be provided financial training classes to better manage and plan for down times.

Advanced

2 Compensation Options

Offering flexible pay distribution, without necessarily changing the total compensation, can allow workers to choose a payment plan that best suits their needs and supports well-being.

Outstanding

3 Improved Compensation and Benefits

Increasing compensation and offering comprehensive benefits, such as enhanced health coverage or retirement plans, can alleviate some of the stress caused by job insecurity. Providing workers with more robust financial and health support reduces anxiety about future employment gaps and helps safeguard their well-being during uncertain times.

CONCLUDING **REMARKS**



As we seek to address mental health-related issues of employees, it is important to acknowledge and understand that our solutions will rarely be ubiquitously applicable. Especially when the interventions focus on the individual. Furthermore, we must remember that above all else, mental health ailments are a serious medical issue that we may not have topical expertise in.

This underlying fact does not dissuade EAPs from acting proactively but demands extreme caution and due diligence.

This guide is presented as an example for EAPs on how they should seek to address stressors. First, a foundational enquiry should be conducted to gather evidence from academic domain to understand the nature of the stressor. This includes not only reviewing evidence from medical community but also understanding how the experience of the stressor varies across various contexts (e.g., cultures, socio-economic backgrounds, personal demographics etc.). This can be achieved by having engagements with the frontline workers where the information around stressors within the context of industry is collected and eventually synthesized.

Once the information is collected, practitioners should seek to create a roadmap of this nature to reduce the dependency on ad-hoc decisions around solutions. This would keep wellness programs grounded in data-driven solutions and generalizable lived realities of construction workers. Finally, it would allow practitioners to distinguish between interventions that seek to provide workers with cognitive-behavioral skills from the ones that seek to change how the industry contracts and performs work. The industry needs to ensure they are providing individual-level and organization-level solutions as the former can provide short-term improvements and latter would provide long-term improvements.



The Construction Safety
Research Alliance
UCB 428
1111 Engineering Drive
Boulder, CO 80309
www.csra.colorado.edu

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