Digital Stress Policy

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DIGITAL STRESS

Though there are many benefits and efficiencies gained through the use ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and software applications in the workplace, there are also many problems caused by constant interaction with technology, and with others online. Digital stress or technostress are terms used interchangeably to describe the negative psychological impact of using computers, digital systems, smartphones or the process of adapting to new technologies at work and at home. Communication overload and the requirement for digital multi-tasking

have been shown to increase perceived stress, as well as contribute to burnout, depression, anxiety and poorer health (Muller-Thur et al, 2018). Key drivers for this are perceived social pressure (expectation to respond), the need for social interaction and the fear of missing out (Reinecke et al., 2016). Even now, the current pandemic has created a surge in the use of digital technology as a result of national lockdowns, remote working and reduced social contact, which can only serve to increase these negative psychological impacts.

DIGITALIZATION OF WORK

The modern office-based environment is characterized by constant changes in technology resulting in a multitude of transformational processes to adapt to. Sometimes employees need to access work emails through their mobile phones, which makes switching off and recovery really challenging. It may also affect personal relationships if the employee is not fully present at home with their family and friends outside of work hours.

SOURCES OF STRESS

Invasion	Office workers can often access their work on private devices outside of work time. Lack of boundaries between work and private time compromises recovery and productivity of employees.
Overload	Research shows that even 74% of managers experienced stress from information overload (Arla Day, 2012). With a constant stream of emails and messages coming from different devices and applications, it can feel overwhelming.
Complexity	Many employees find new tools unnecessarily complex and intimidating, which often come with its own jargon to adjust to.
Insecurity	Sometimes workers are expected to learn the new tool by themselves without any additional training. What makes it more challenging is when they feel that they can't keep up to date.
Uncertainty	As technology keeps evolving, some employees might feel insecure and uncertain in relation to how their work will look like tomorrow.

THE IMPACT

Research has identified that exposure to ICT stress increases levels of the stress hormone, cortisol and over time can eventually lead to burnout. Technostress can also cause a wide range of other negative effects (Berg-Beckhoff et al., 2017) which include:

Mental	Increased errors, decreased productivity and difficulty concentrating.
Physical	Headaches, sore neck, back and shoulder muscles, hypertension and inability to relax.
Emotional	Anxiety, panic attacks, irritability and reduced job satisfaction.
Economical	Increased healthcare expenses as a result of workers experiencing high levels of digital stress.
Security-related	A team that is affected by ICT stress might avoid tech-related procedures. This can lead to security risks and ignoring important security procedures.

THE NEED FOR DIGITAL STRESS POLICY

As discussed, digital technology has many benefits and yet also negatively impacts the mental and physical health of employees, increases absenteeism and healthcare costs for the employer (Santuzzi, 2014). However, having a well-designed digital work environment can actually benefit health (Dragano et al, 2020) which having a digital stress policy in the workplace can help with. It protects the employer and the employees from the negative consequences of technology-based stress.

Zevo health can assist in the development of a tailor-made Digital Stress Policy, based on assessment of your company needs as well as training provision to assist in its implementation. In the meantime, there are many actions that both employers and employees can do to help reduce the burden of digital stress:

EMPLOYER

1. **Asses the risk.** Get a clear picture of the current situation at your workplace.

2. **Increase the awareness.** Knowing what causes technostress is important in prevention. Encourage employees to speak up when they are struggling with new technology.

3. **Encourage work boundaries.** To prevent technostress make it clear to employees that they are not expected to reply to work emails, calls and messages outside their work hours.

4. **Training.** Ensure that staff are fully trained in new technology.

5. **Review the technology.** Ask yourself: what is the minimum technology required for your team to carry out their tasks? It would help to remove tools and apps that are unnecessary.

6. **Reduce unnecessary communication.** Communication through emails for example should only involve the relevant parties containing key important messages.

EMPLOYEES

1. **Switch off from work - "digital detox"**. Inform your work colleagues you are going to be unavailable at a certain time.

2. **Aim to have important conversations face to face.** It can be difficult to detect tone in text messages or emails which can result in misunderstandings and lead to increased stress.

3. **Use digital technologies to schedule important conversations** and not so much to have those conversations.

4. **Consider that you might not always need the latest piece of technology.** Keeping up with ever changing technologies also generates stress. Technology was created to serve you, instead of the other way around.

5. Use apps that will help you **control your screen time.**

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