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It's that time of year: Stress levels ratchet up at work

Firms that rely on the holiday rush try to keep employees from burning out

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On the Job

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Just two more days and the workers at PersonalizationMall.com in Burr Ridge can breathe a collective sigh of relief.

Wednesday marks the cutoff for personalized orders for delivery by Christmas Eve. After operating around the clock since Thanksgiving, the company's 650 permanent and temporary workers will have produced, packed and shipped about \$18 million worth of merchandise, or 35 percent of the company's annual volume of \$50 million, said Kathy Napleton, co-founder and executive vice president.

"We're Santa's workshop here," she said of the company (that processes 15,000 orders each day of personalized mugs, ornaments, frames and other items during this holiday period.

To meet demand, the company runs two 11 1/2 -hour shifts. To manage the longer days, it brings in free meals and encourages workers to help one another. Still, Napleton acknowledges it's stressful.

"Everyone takes a deep breath," she said. "We know it's for a short amount of time."

Regardless of the time of year, Americans are stressed, and often it's job-related, experts said. Three of four Americans surveyed this year said they experienced an unhealthy amount of stress, according to the American Psychological Association's 2010 Stress in America survey released in November. The association didn't provide comparison figures for earlier years but said stress has been a continual problem for the last several years.

Stress is considered a cause of chronic illnesses, such as heart disease, diabetes, depression and other maladies, the association reports. Yet many Americans say they are unable to manage stress effectively through exercise and lifestyle changes simply because they don't have time.

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Over time, stress on the job contributes to burnout, said Dr. Gabriela Cora, author of "Leading Under Pressure."

"Although people may be happy to work double duty or extra shifts, that doesn't mean they won't experience stress," she said.

Workers at PersonalizationMall.com can count on being stressed at work during the holidays. The company doesn't allow any vacations from Thanksgiving to Christmas and extends hours for most workers. Napleton acknowledges the hardship involved.

"On a personal level, it's bittersweet," she said. "Everyone wants to kick back and enjoy family and friends, and this is our busiest period," Napleton said.

To counter the effects of the stress, the company makes every effort to build a sense of community.

"It's a good atmosphere. People care about each other and the product," said Lisa Pavesic, manager of quality control, who started at the company as a temporary worker in 2002. "As much as it gets crazy, there's also a lot of laughter."

Workers appreciate the fact that managers share in the long hours. Having seniority doesn't mean you won't be asked to work nights, because PersonalizationMall.com needs some experienced workers on the second shift to ensure smooth operations, Napleton said. Even so, it's a voluntary system.

"We don't force anyone to do anything. We gather. We meet. We talk about the schedules, and we just always work it out," Napleton said.

Workers are cross-trained to be able to handle several jobs, and the office staff pitches in during peak periods. To keep operations running well, managers ask employees for a list of what could have gone smoother, Pavesic said.

"We walk around the floor and ask, 'Do you need anything? Could anything be going better?'" she said. "People all know they have each other's backs. We're all in it together."

If not managed well, moving to a night shift from daytime hours can bring additional stress, said Cora, a medical doctor and leadership coach at the Executive Health and Wealth Institute in Miami.

Still, being aware of the potential risks associated with stress is the first step in reducing the impact, Cora said. She recommends workers and managers develop lifestyle strategies to manage stress, use organizational skills such as planning and prioritizing to manage workloads, look for opportunities where their personal values are aligned with a company's culture and find ways to create an enjoyable workplace.

"One of the great things a manager can do during times of more pressure is to come into work with a positive attitude," Cora said.

Managers need to consciously motivate workers by finding what works for individuals. "Different things work for different folks. A good manager will help people do their very best," Cora said.

Demanding the same from every worker isn't realistic. "Not all personalities can work 11 or 12 hours every single day. It's a big jump from an eight-hour shift," Cora said.

Bringing relief from a stressful job is imperative to avoiding burnout, Cora said.

PersonalizationMall.com gives workers two 15-minute breaks plus lunch during the long holiday shifts. What's more, the break room is decorated to look like a tropical paradise, said Jeff Chun, vice president of marketing.

While a 20-minute break is ideal, even taking a few minutes to walk around or get a drink of water can make a difference, said Nancy Snell, a professional business coach in New York. If you can't leave your post, stop and make yourself breathe deeply to break the cycle. "This pause button allows us to refresh," she said.

No matter what industry you're in, organizing workloads by creating systems can help reduce stress by making operations more predictable, Snell said.

PersonalizationMall.com has a system for just about everything, Pavesic said. "There's always a lot of work and it can be a lot of pressure, but the systems in place help to maintain a balance."

In addition, the company makes every effort to create a culture of respect. "It's a caring team. Everyone knows they're valued," said Larry Lifson, vice president of business development. By encouraging feedback, the company improves operations and also empowers workers, he said. Most new ideas originate from the people who are doing the work day to day, he said.

Increased communication is an excellent way for managers to keep workers motivated, Snell said.

"Let them know you are concerned. Let them know you appreciate them. Let them know they will be heard," she said. "It's about the communication. When we feel validated and protected, even though we're stressed, we can handle it."

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- The percentage of Chicago residents who report feeling tense or stressed out at work climbed to 37 percent in 2010 from 28 percent in 2009.
- Stress factors include work (74 percent), the economy (71 percent) and money (70 percent).
- Among Chicago-area employees, 60 percent report being satisfied with their jobs, down from 66 percent last year and 74 percent two years ago.
- Chicago residents are more likely than American adults overall to report "personal health concerns" (63 percent versus 52 percent) and "family health concerns" (59 percent versus 47 percent) as a somewhat or very significant source of stress.

In Chicago, concerns about personal health increased dramatically as a source of stress in 2010 (up from 37

percent in 2009), as did concerns about family health (up from 43 percent in 2009).

SOURCE: American Psychological Association

Stressed out in Chicago

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