

## Mid Life: A Crisis for the Baby Boomers or a Crisis for Industry?

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The baby boom generation represents eighteen years of population explosion from the years 1946 to 1964. The first of 78 million baby boomers turned 50 years old on January 1, 1996. As the baby boomers have aged, the average age of the US labor force has risen correspondingly. While previous generations of workers tended to drop out of the labor force after they reached age 55, it is forecasted that baby boomers will remain in the labor force longer. Because of this, the percentage of older workers (age 55 and older) is projected to grow twice as fast as the total labor force, and will amount to 14% of the US labor force by the year 2005.

US employers have, for the last five years, started to reduce employee-related disability costs through more effective medical management and return-to-work programs. The largest challenge to these programs and their savings will be industry's ability to adapt to the reality of an aging workforce.

The two key elements that employers should focus on are:

1. Integration of Return-To-Work programs to include non-occupational injuries and illnesses
2. Development of prevention, treatment and Return-To-Work strategies for work-related stress

Baby boomers today are facing a difficult stage of life—an increase in stress from both family and work. Mid-life crisis will take on a whole new meaning in the years to come.

The 1994 General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago has statistically documented the reality of mid-life crisis. A representative sample of Americans were asked whether they had experienced any trauma in the past 12 months; overall, 40% said they had. This was lowest (27%) among people in their early 30s, highest (49%) among the middle-aged people in their late 40s, and peaking at 53% among 50-54 year-olds. The crisis revolved around things that the baby boom generation considered most important—family, work and health.

Employees generally experience their first serious illness in their late 40s or early 50s. In addition, this is when chronic illnesses begin: arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, etc.

Whether the injury or illness is work-related or not, the longer an employee stays off from work, the more likely it will be that the employee will never return. In the last five years, employers have seen evidence that work can actually be therapeutic for injured workers; it can help the employee recover sooner and more completely. The great challenge will be to integrate "work as therapy" into non-occupational illnesses and injuries, as well as, worker's compensation.

## The Baby Boom Generation and Work-related Stress

Stress is quickly becoming not only one of the top health-concerns for baby boomers, but also one of the top productivity and performance concerns for American employers. This alone would be justification for any "best practice" employer to examine the company strategy for dealing with stress. However, with workers' compensation stress claims on the rise, it would be fair to say that work-related stress is quickly becoming the "bad back" of the new millennium.

To understand work-related stress and its relationship to the baby boom generation, we should first consider stress itself. We are all under stress; there is no such thing as a stress-free life. There is obviously no such thing as a stress-free job. Everyone is exposed to daily pressures. Most people cope with—even flourish on—modest amounts of stress without suffering any ill effects. Another name for this kind of stress could be "challenge." Challenges may confront us, but as long as we feel in control, stress can be experienced as a positive thing.

While there are many theories of stress, experts agree that the principal difference between healthy "challenge" and unhealthy "stress" is the reality (or the perception) of the person being able to control or impact the outcome. When the sense of control is lost and coping mechanisms break down, a potentially healthy challenge can become dangerous stress. Untreated and unrecognized, this stress can affect employee productivity, attendance, attitude, and often, physical and mental health.

It is frequently very difficult to determine where stress comes from. Employers often ask: "Is it the stress from work or from home that is the main cause of the problem?"

Only lawmakers and lobbyists are naïve enough to believe that the impacts of home and work can be clearly separated. Take the example of a baby boomer that is going through a re-organization at work, and the death of a parent at home. Which is the main cause of the stress? Common sense tells us that it is a foolish question. Mental health professionals tell us that the most significant issue may not be the nature of the stress or challenge itself, but rather the employee's feeling of helplessness and the perception of not being in control.

It is the nature of the traumas of mid-life—chronic illness, death of a parent, corporate re-organization—to not only cause stress but to also cause despair and a lack of confidence in the employee's ability to affect the outcome.

Organizations need to develop effective prevention, treatment and return-to-work strategies to deal with the baby boom generation when it collides with the reality of work-related stress.

## Retention of Baby Boomers: Keeping the Best and the Brightest

### Alternatives to promotion

#### Issues

- ◆ Today only one in 50 employees will make it to top management compared to one in 20 in 1987
- ◆ Baby boomers will leave larger size employers and go to small entrepreneurial firms where there is more room for advancement
- ◆ Career enhancement will replace career advancement as a primary need

### Benefit packages re-designed

#### Issues

- ◆ Baby boomers will demand a re-structuring of benefit packages to meet their needs and concerns
- ◆ Expansion of EAP (Employee Assistance Programs) will be needed to address such issues as childcare, care for the elderly, one-parent families, sandwiched families, etc.
- ◆ Eldercare benefits will need to include financing of long-term-custodial care
- ◆ Expansion of medical care benefits will be needed, including protection from arbitrary Managed Care decisions

### Productivity

#### Issues

- ◆ Stress management
- ◆ Return to work and "work as therapy"
- ◆ Job-sharing
- ◆ Personal/professional growth
- ◆ Job re-design and accommodation of baby boomers with health problems