



HEALTHY WORK CAMPAIGN

# Work Stress Solutions

## A Guide for Employers

June 2024

A project of the Center for Social Epidemiology

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# Introduction

We created “**Work Stress Solutions: A Guide for Employers**” to assist organizations in cultivating a supportive and healthy work environment that reduces work stress and enhances employees' physical and mental health and well-being.

**The Guide is a free resource** provided by the Center for Social Epidemiology, a 501c3 nonprofit, which launched the [Healthy Work Campaign](#) (HWC) in 2019 to educate and guide working people and organizations to address the negative impacts of working conditions that can cause stress and ill health. The HWC has a team of occupational health experts and academic researchers with decades of experience in the science of work stress and its prevention, dedicated to improving health.

In October 2022, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, MD, released the [U.S. Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being](#), which acknowledged that work affects mental and physical health and offered Five Essentials to support workplaces as “engines of well-being”. These five elements reflect the Principles of Healthy Work developed from over [40 years of scientific research in psychosocial occupational health](#).

A comprehensive resource, **this Solutions Guide was developed for employers of organizations of all sizes**, private and public sectors, and across industries. It offers easy-to-understand strategies and interventions to improve employee health and well-being by mitigating work-related stressors.

**By implementing the steps in this Guide**, organizations can strategically prioritize initiatives aimed at improving working conditions, policies, programs, and overall organizational culture.

This approach prioritizes the physical and mental health of employees, consequently enhancing safety, well-being, and productivity. By doing so, organizations bolster employee retention and ensure the long-term sustainability of the organization.

## Who is the audience?

This Guide is designed for organizations who are ready to prioritize employee health and well-being, workplace mental health, and addressing stressful working conditions.

**Our methodology** revolves around active participation by employees and management, aiming to enhance workers' health, safety and well-being. We know that involving workers in identifying and alleviating stressful working conditions is the most effective approach to improving employee health and well-being.

**The Guide is written for** any individual/s within an organization who will be taking the lead to safeguard and improve the health, safety and well-being of the workforce, including but not limited to human resources personnel, wellness program managers, EHS or OHS managers, labor-management committees, or other organizational leaders.

# What is work stress?

Work stress manifests as both a psychological and physical reaction triggered by a perceived imbalance between job demands and an individual's capacity to meet them. This occurs when the pressures and expectations inherent in one's work surpass coping abilities and available resources.

Typical [sources of stress in the workplace](#) (“stressors”) include heavy workloads, extended and irregular work hours, stringent deadlines, interpersonal conflicts, work-life imbalance, limited control over tasks, insufficient support from colleagues or supervisors, and job instability.

Work stress also has a subjective component and manifests uniquely in each person. What one individual perceives as stressful may not affect another similarly. This variability stems from various factors, including individual personality traits, coping mechanisms, and external support networks. Personality traits characterized by resilience or susceptibility to stress significantly influence how individuals perceive and respond to workplace stressors.

Coping strategies and support structures within and outside the workplace play a pivotal role in an individual's ability to

effectively manage stress. This doesn't mean that training individuals to build “resilience” or “coping strategies” is the best answer. Sufficient evidence shows that a stressful or toxic work environment can cause chronic stress in some of the most resilient people over time.

The effects of work stress can manifest in complex ways, impacting an individual's emotional, physical, and behavioral well-being.

“Exposure to chronic stress, without sufficient recovery time, can also influence psychological health...”

Stress is caused by external sources of stress in the work environment over which working people often have limited control. These “stressors” evoke the “fight or flight” response. **Exposure to chronic stress, without sufficient recovery time**, can also influence psychological health, leading to burnout and common mental health disorders. However, it can also alter physiological systems, including increasing blood pressure (e.g. hypertension), metabolic dysfunction (increasing risk of obesity and diabetes), increased inflammatory factors (e.g. c-reactive proteins), all of which increase the risk for cardiovascular diseases (e.g. heart disease and stroke).

## 3 Ways Work Stress Manifests

### 1. Emotionally



### 2. Physically



### 3. Behaviorally



## Symptoms to watch out for

- \* Feelings of anxiety, irritability, or low mood
- \* Headaches, muscle tension, gastrointestinal issues, and sleep disturbances
- \* Higher rates of absenteeism, higher rates of presenteeism, reduced productivity, and interpersonal conflicts with colleagues



# What are the costs?

## Top Costs of Chronic Work Stress to Individuals

Work-related stress can negatively affect health; however, it also has a wide range of costs and consequences, affecting both individuals and organizations.

**Health Impacts**



**Mental Health**



**Personal Relationships**



**Job Dissatisfaction**



**Intent to Leave**



## How it impacts workers

- musculoskeletal problems, high blood pressure, cardiovascular diseases, and even an increased risk of stroke and shortened life
- burnout, anxiety disorders, and depression, affecting an individual's overall well-being
- straining relationships with family and friends, and reducing the quality of life outside of work
- decreased job satisfaction, reduced motivation, and lower overall job performance
- reportedly a major reason to look for a new job; unemployment & job hunting can also be stressful

# Work stress costs businesses billions of dollars annually.\*

There are many reasons businesses should combat work stress.

## 10 REASONS Businesses Should Combat Chronic Work Stress

- Lower Sickness Absence**
  - Over 50% of the 550 million working days lost annually in the U.S. from absenteeism are stress-related.
  - 55% of companies' sick leaves are related to psychosocial work stress. And the cost is estimated to be \$748 billion annually.
- Lower Healthcare Costs**
  - Healthcare expenditures are nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress.
  - Work stress makes workers sick, which increases insurance premiums in the long term.
- Less Disability**
  - Work stress increases the risk for **short and long-term disability**.
  - Job strain may increase the risk of disability pension due to musculoskeletal disorders.
  - Job strain (high demands & low control), combined with effort-reward imbalance, can double the risk of disability due to depression.
- Improved Mental Health**
  - Chronic work stress can produce anxiety, and when persistent enough, can lead to conditions such as depression.
  - Those working 11+ hours/day are 2-3x more likely to experience depression.
  - Mental health costs businesses an est. \$1.6 trillion annually.
- Less Burnout**

Burnout is: (1) exhaustion, (2) feeling cynical, AND (3) a lack of professional efficacy

  - In a 2021 APA survey, 32% felt some level of burnout.
  - Workers with high demands, low control, and low social support were at greater risk of burnout.
- More Lives Saved**

Work stress can cost up to 3 years of your life!

  - 3-4 hours of overtime work per day is associated with a 60% increased risk of incident coronary heart disease.
  - Those with high levels of work stress (job strain, effort-reward imbalance) are 2x as likely to think about committing suicide.
- More Retention**
  - Work stress affects retention. About a fifth of staff turnover can be related to stress at work.
  - For some positions, this can cost at least a year's wages (for recruitment, hiring & training).
- Less Accidents**
  - Employees who 'always' work under pressure are 5x more likely to have an accident than employees who are 'never' subject to pressurized work.
- Better Morale & Engagement**
  - Input into decision-making, organizational fairness, perceptions of coworkers, and workplace cooperation each had a positive relationship with morale.
  - In the absence of workers having a say (low control) or sense of organizational justice, workers' engagement can decrease over time (and is associated with reduced mental & physical health).
- Improved Productivity**
  - Long work hours (55+/week) are counterproductive; productivity declines as overtime hours increase.
  - Presenteeism (working while sick) accounts for approximately 58% of the overall cost to employers of stress, anxiety and depression.

**Sources**  
Business Costs of Unhealthy Work Stats & Infographics  
What is healthy work?  
Reduce work stressors.  
Improve job quality and health.

\*Source: [Business Case for Healthy Work](#)

Download graphic: [PDF](#)

Other costs to organizations can be harder to quantify and include:

- **Reduced Creativity, Innovation and Decreased Employee Morale:** High work stress levels can stifle creativity and innovation, hindering an organization's growth and adaptability. In stressful work environments, employees may feel unsupported by managers or colleagues, resulting in lower engagement, isolation, and low morale, which ultimately **impacts the organization's overall performance and success**. Additionally, stressed employees or managers can negatively affect their colleagues' morale, contributing to a toxic work environment.
- **Legal Risks & Reputation Damage:** Workplace stress may stem from experiences of harassment, bullying, or discrimination against employees, potentially leading to legal ramifications.

- A high-stress workplace can also damage a company's reputation in several ways.
  - High levels of stress can impact **employee morale and productivity**, potentially resulting in lower-quality products or services.
  - It may lead to **increased employee turnover**, which can suggest to outsiders that the company is not a desirable place to work.
  - News of a stressful work environment can spread quickly through word of mouth or online reviews, **tarnishing the company's image** as a good employer.
  - If stress-related issues lead to legal disputes or public scandals, **the company's reputation** may suffer even further.

Overall, a high-stress workplace can undermine trust in the organization and deter potential employees, customers, and investors.

# What is healthy work?

Healthy work refers to a work environment that promotes the physical, mental and emotional health of employees by **minimizing workplace stressors**.

Healthy work encompasses various factors such as:

- reasonable workloads and staffing
- supportive management practices
- clear communication channels
- work-life balance initiatives
- physical safety measures
- opportunities for professional development
- access to resources for managing stress.



*In a healthy work environment, employees feel valued, engaged, and their voices are heard, reducing illness and improving overall health and well-being.*



**Organizations that prioritize healthy work [can benefit](#)** from increased employee satisfaction and productivity, and lower health insurance and workers' compensation costs, lower rates of absenteeism and turnover, and improved organizational performance.

## A systems approach

This Work Stress Solutions Guide proposes a systems approach for organizations to identify causes of stress and implement solutions to create **a healthy work environment** to protect employee health and well-being.

We recommend a “systems thinking approach” to identify, evaluate, and reduce workplace stress.



Featured on: [Solutions for Employers \(PNG\)](#)

## A deeper understanding

Systems thinking involves **understanding the interconnectedness** of various factors within the work environment and considering the broader organizational context in which health and well-being are influenced. Changes or issues affecting one part of an organization can have ripple effects across the entire organization. Mapping out these interconnections **provides a comprehensive understanding of how each part functions** and how people collaborate to move the organization forward.

Rather than addressing stress in isolation, this approach recognizes that work stress is not just in the minds of employees, but it is caused by multiple interconnected elements such as organizational structure, culture, policies, communication, workload distribution, resources, and social relationships among coworkers and supervisors.

**While we offer steps to think holistically** about your organization, **you can also begin at Step 3** by implementing the Healthy Work Survey (collecting employee work stress data) and then return to **Step 1 and Step 2** to get management buy-in for the “solutions stage.”

You may already have collected information about your organization and employee health and well-being, in which case **you can also start at Step 5-6** by investigating our resources on designing work stress solutions and including employee voices.

Tailor this Guide and these Steps to your organization’s unique needs and resources. [Reach out to us](#) if you have any questions or [book a consultation](#). We are here to help.

**The Healthy Work Campaign Team**

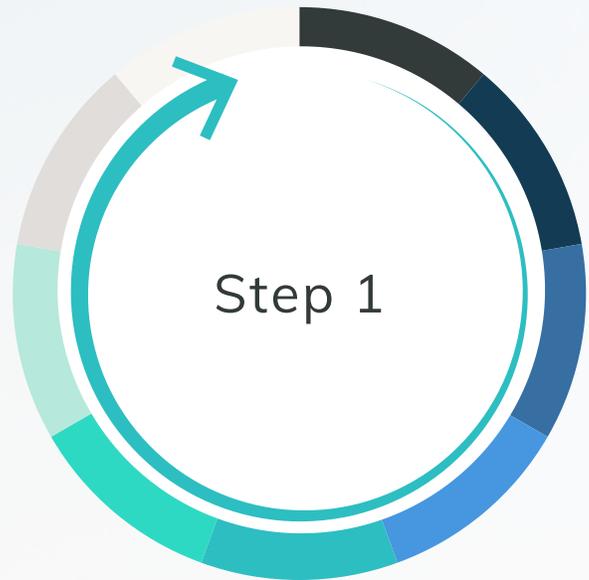
# STEP ONE

## ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS EVALUATION

### Where to start

First, evaluate the **strengths and weaknesses in your organization** as it relates to worker health, well-being and unhealthy work. This process may require some time and can be done after implementing the survey if desired. However, it is **a helpful step** to plan targeted, and effective organizational changes that can positively impact the majority of employees. It can also help optimize the use of existing resources.

By assessing current resources, strengths and weaknesses of your organization concerning employee health and well-being, you can leverage your strengths and address any shortcomings. This evaluation can also help justify to leadership **the reasons for moving forward** and collecting data from employees regarding health and safety outcomes.



*“...a helpful step to plan targeted, and effective organizational changes...”*

### The Data

This data can include information on your organization's structure (e.g. number of employees by department), or data that might be useful to look back on after implementing changes (e.g. workers compensation claims, turnover rates etc.). It is also useful to know what policies, programs and practices are currently in place to protect or enhance employee health and well-being (e.g. wellness program, EAPs, illness and injury prevention programs etc.). You can use the **Organization Systems Evaluation checklist** form provided in Appendix 1 (at the end of this document).



# STEP TWO

## LEADERSHIP READINESS ASSESSMENT

### Get buy-in

Leadership support is vital for reasons such as allocating resources, setting a leadership example, fostering a healthy organizational culture, aligning employee health with organizational goals, and ensuring compliance with laws and regulations. However, it is also important to seek endorsement from every level of the organization, including Executive Leadership, Middle Managers, HR, Wellness, Health & Safety teams, employees, and labor unions (if applicable).

### How?

**First:** present to senior management the organizational assessment data collected in Step One, regarding the strengths and weaknesses around employee health and well-being policies and practices. Describe the purpose of the Healthy Work Survey for assessing employee work stress and health.



**Second:** Evaluate your organization's leadership preparedness for implementing the Healthy Work Survey, designing “solutions” (interventions), and for prioritizing employee health and safety by completing the [Leadership Readiness Assessment \(LRA\)](#) (a self-scoring Google Form) or in Appendix 2. We provide a scoring system for the LRA for understanding the level of management support available at your organization.

*“Describe the purpose of the Healthy Work Survey for assessing employee work stress and health.”*

### Establish a committee

When securing management agreement and support for launching the HWS, it's recommended to propose the establishment of a "**management committee**," comprising members from various organizational levels and locations. This committee and its “designated leader” will guide the HWS implementation, dissemination/feedback process, and solution-design process outlined below. You can also use already established structures such as a labor-management health & safety committee, wellness program, or an HR employee health committee.

# STEP THREE

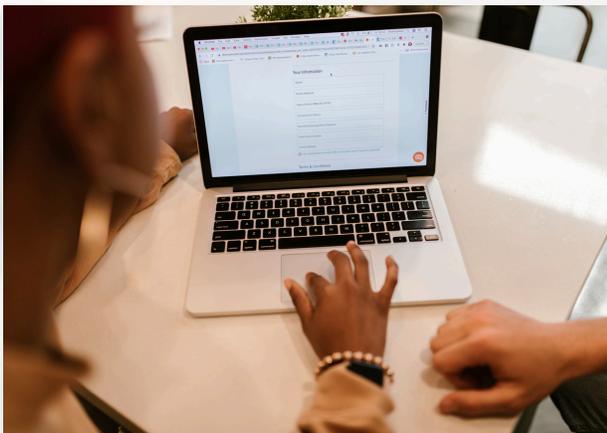
## IMPLEMENT THE HEALTHY WORK SURVEY

### Identify the source

Work can be a cause of poor mental and physical health for employees. Finding out what these sources of workplace stress are, is essential. **The Healthy Work Survey collects data to** identify work stress factors that may be affecting employee health and well-being. The HWS tool, developed by university researchers and the nonprofit Center for Social Epidemiology, is **an online, free, [validated](#) instrument**. Before deciding to implement the survey for your employees, you can try out the HWS for Individuals [here](#). (The HWS for Individuals and Organizations are the same.)

### Gain valuable insights

What sets this survey apart from “engagement” or “employee well-being” surveys, is its ability to provide insights into **sources of work stress** affecting your employees.



The HWS uses many of the same items from the NIOSH Quality of Work Life questionnaire, so results can be compared to this nationally representative survey. This enables an organization to identify and prioritize the major sources of work stress.

**The HWS questions include work-related stressors** that can cause burnout and common mental and physical health problems, as well as validated general physical and mental health questions. HWS results show the extent to which work stressors such as, high job demands, work-life conflict, low social support, workplace bullying, are present among workers and how high the risk is relative to the U.S. working population.

*“...an online, free, validated instrument...”*

### A unique tool

This tool is unique as it is online, and offers **an automated, comprehensive personal report** directly to individuals, and an aggregate report at no cost to organizations, usually within a few days. The report rates the sources of each work stressor at high, intermediate or low risk, as well as noting other organizational issues including work hours, schedules, and health and safety. See [content overview](#).

Click [here](#) to **request access** to the HWS for organizations. And for **tips about conducting the Healthy Work Survey**, please go to Appendix 3.

# STEP FOUR

## DISSEMINATE FINDINGS

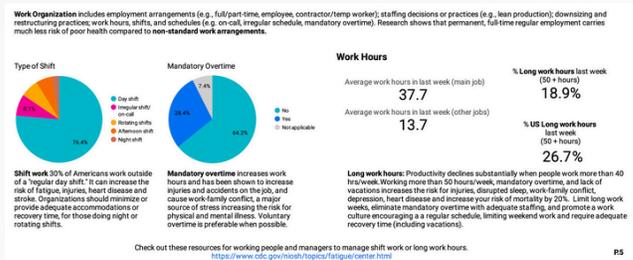
### To Management

The results of the survey (aggregate report) can be shared first with executives/management/main decision-makers so they can understand the results and be able to communicate with staff about them. If you have formed a “management committee”, they should receive the report, discuss the issues, and consult with HWC consultants (if desired) to understand the underlying problems identified in the report.

We recommend that management or a management committee, after reviewing the HWS aggregate report, **identify 2-3 work related problems to prioritize.** Identifying these problem areas can be based on a determination of the extent of the risk (the percentage of employees affected) and the potential impact of any changes, as well as the feasibility and resources available.



“...identify 2-3 work related problems to prioritize...”



### An example of setting priorities:

An organization receives a red “high risk” rating for low rewards because the average score is higher than the U.S. average and the % of staff at risk is higher than in the U.S. However, only 30% of employees reported scores that indicate very low rewards. The organization also reported a red “high risk” rating for high job demands, but a higher percentage of staff (65%) reported very high job demands scores.

In this case, addressing job demands may be a higher priority, initially.

# STEP FOUR

## DISSEMINATE FINDINGS (CONT'D)

### To Employees

Management should communicate the aggregate results of the survey as well as their recommendation regarding the priority areas needing attention to all levels of the organization, especially seeking input from employees and labor representatives (if applicable). During presentations to staff (either at "all staff meetings" or department staff meetings), **there should be mechanisms for all employees to provide their initial feedback** (preferably anonymously) about the HWS results and problem areas recommended.



You may ask employees to rate the problem areas or add additional ones for consideration. This should be done using secure, anonymous forms of online communication, or by placing locked suggestion boxes throughout the organization, or on bulletin boards where employees could add checkmarks to show interest in specific recommended changes. **Determine the most suitable method for collecting employee feedback** based on the size, culture, structure or major geographic regions of your organization.

*"Emphasize the need to prioritize the major findings in regard to work-related stress..."*

### To Union Representatives

In cases where employees are represented by union(s), it is highly recommended to involve union representatives (if you haven't already prior to implementing the HWS), to share results and get their feedback about the findings. **Emphasize the need to prioritize the major findings** in regard to work-related stress by sharing the educational resources from the HWC about work stress solutions. Union involvement can be achieved through existing labor-management committees or by including union leadership in presentations of survey findings.

**Input from union leaders and labor relations is crucial** for implementing many changes that reduce stress and enhance mental and physical health and safety of employees. Improvements to working conditions that cause stress, may intersect with existing labor-management contracts, therefore legally requiring both management and the union to engage collaboratively to discuss what might need to be negotiated in future collective bargaining or what could be agreed upon in advance. **Positive labor relations are a sign of healthier workplaces.**

# STEP FIVE

## ACHIEVE EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION

### Employee Input

Studies indicate that **involving employees in the design and planning of organizational improvements can make new policies and programs more effective.** Employees possess valuable insights regarding stressful working conditions, since they are directly engaged in the day-to-day tasks that can cause stress. Their input can provide feasible and practical ideas to improve work-related stress and enhance employee health and well-being.

When employees are involved in decisions regarding their roles and are afforded the respect of being heard, it can boost morale, decision-making autonomy, and job control. Employee participation is health-promoting and can result in increased engagement (showing concern for the organization and perceiving it as a favorable workplace) and productivity.



***It is recommended that if your employees are unionized, informing and getting input from union representatives on the best approach to obtain employee participation is important.***

The approach to employee input can vary depending on the structure, feasibility, and culture of your organization. You can:

- a) form an employee-only committee
- b) conduct focus groups (using an external facilitator if possible)
- c) request anonymous feedback.

***Each approach is described in more detail in Appendix 4 (at the end of this document).***

### Note

When soliciting ideas and feedback from employees in any format, it's crucial to **prioritize confidentiality.** Psychological safety is integral to a healthy workplace, as it **assures employees that they can voice work-related concerns or problems** without fear of retaliation. If employees are represented by a union, then suggesting the union ask for a volunteer representative to be part of the committee would be ideal. If complete anonymity isn't feasible, ensuring confidentiality by reporting only group-level information without disclosing individual contributions and/or using external facilitators is recommended.

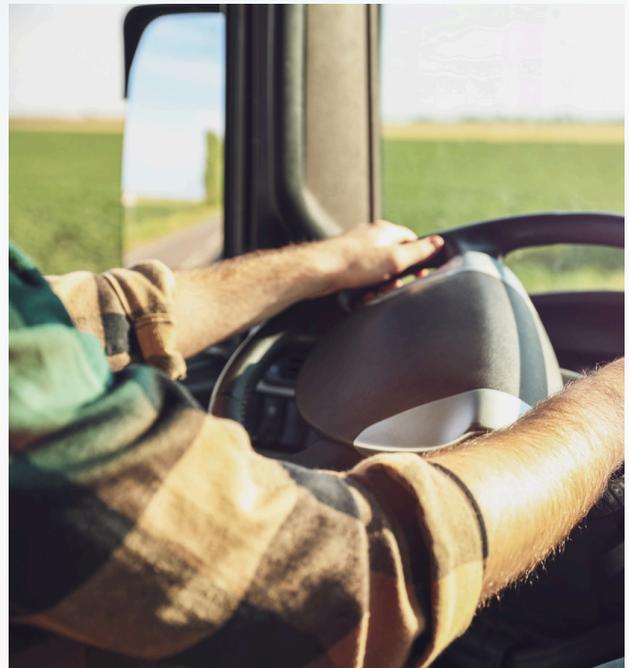
# STEP SIX

## DESIGN WORK STRESS SOLUTIONS

### The good news

The good news is that **work stress can be reduced or prevented**. Numerous [scientific studies](#) show that when organizations address sources of workplace stress, employee health and well-being improve.

Prior to beginning this process, whether as an executive, manager or employee committee, **learn about the causes of work stress**. You can review our "[Solutions by Stressor](#)" info sheets and "[Healthy Work Strategies Case Studies](#)" to find practical, evidenced-based ideas for many of the major work stressors (e.g. high workload/job demands, low job control, social support, work-family, workplace bullying etc.) identified in the HWS report.



“...work stress can be reduced or prevented.”

### Successful strategies

These resources showcase **successful ideas and changes** implemented in various organizational settings. Examples encompass modifications to work practices/processes, policies, management practices, communication, or employee support programs.



Reduce harmful work stressors  
Improve job quality and health

#### Work Stress Solutions **Reducing work-family conflict**

**Work-life conflict** is a lack of time and energy to adequately meet both the demands of work and non-work life. It is a source of stress that can lead to burnout, sleep problems, higher blood pressure, and productivity impacts. Reducing work-life conflict can promote gender equity, since working women are still the primary caretakers of children and the elderly and benefit greatly from work-life balance policies.

# STEP SEVEN

## IMPLEMENT SOLUTIONS

### Gathering feedback

The **designated representative** for the “management committee,” or whoever is overseeing the implementation of the survey and dissemination of survey results, will need to:

- **Gather and collate the feedback** about the HWS and recommended solutions **from (a)** the “employee committee”, **(b)** anonymous employee feedback, or **(c)** any other forms of feedback received from different levels of the organization.
- **Formulate a “Solutions Proposal”** by presenting the compiled feedback and recommended solutions from these sources, to the management committee.

The **management committee will**, based on feasibility, available resources, impact (anticipated significant change) and scope (the number of employees who will be affected by this intervention), **agree to implement some or all of the interventions.**



*“...presenting the compiled feedback and recommended solutions...”*

### Solutions plan

It is recommended that after these decisions have been agreed to by management, that **the designated representative communicate the “solutions plan”** back to all employees (especially the employee committee) and provide additional mechanisms (e.g. anonymous feedback forms) and reasonable time for feedback. After incorporating any additional input and making necessary revisions, the proposed solutions can be implemented.

# STEP SEVEN

## IMPLEMENT SOLUTIONS (CONT'D)

### How?

Implementing the proposed solution(s) is **dependent on** the type and size of organization, work environment structure and remote work vs. in-person. It also depends on whether the new practices, policies or programs need to be implemented company-wide, by region, or by department/unit or directly with employees (e.g. training).

Senior management must be willing to provide **the necessary resources for the successful implementation of the interventions**. With management and employee input determining which solutions are prioritized, we anticipate that the intervention plan should have full support.



**Develop a clear action plan and timeline** as the interventions (policy, practice or program, training etc.) must be specific and time-based. Outline the implementation steps and attach a timeline for completion. If a task is not completed as scheduled, **remain flexible**: either extend the deadline or adjust your plan if necessary. For example, you might repeat the HWS 6-12 months after the intervention to assess any changes in the reported stressors, if you believe enough time has passed for it to take effect. Alternatively, you can develop your own evaluation instrument specific to the proposed intervention to evaluate whether changes were effective.

### Communication

**Communication is crucial** for successful program implementation. Inform all employees about the upcoming changes **to ensure their engagement and cooperation**. Transparency is key to success; discuss successes, hurdles, and delays openly. If you must delay or interrupt an intervention, be sure to communicate this to employees. Otherwise, they may assume the intervention has been abandoned and become disappointed. As specific policies, practices, or programs are implemented, it's important to maintain established methods of employee participation, particularly through anonymous feedback.

### Sustainability

**Sustainability is crucial** for a successful program to prevent work stress. Use **systems-level thinking** (e.g. how the organization as a whole is benefiting from improving employee health and well-being, look at organizational indicators as described in Step 1) to **ensure that any recommended changes are sustainable and integrated into the organization's overall policies or culture**. Think long-term—consider whether you need to modify policies or offer new benefits to support these changes. For example, you may propose making a change to the mission of the company to reflect more attention to employees mental health and well being. **Remain flexible**; if something isn't working, be open to change, adapt, and continue moving forward.

# STEP EIGHT

## EVALUATE & COMMUNICATE

### Evaluate

It is recommended to evaluate any implemented policies, programs or practices from the start. The “management committee” should consider SMART goals, **Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely**, to develop measurable changes based on the main purpose of a solution.

**For example**, the changes might be measured short term by:

- Improved work stressor group risk (HWS)
- Lower self-reported stress/exhaustion levels (HWS)

Or longer term (with organizational systems data):

- reduction in sick days
- Increase in job satisfaction or engagement

**We strongly recommend utilizing the Healthy Work Survey on an annual basis as a benchmark.** The survey contains measures which allow for assessing group changes in work stressors and other employee health issues, after interventions.

**You might be able to answer questions such as:**

- Have the % of employees reporting high workloads decreased?
- Have our average scores fallen or become lower than the U.S. averages?
- Are there less people reporting workplace bullying or violence?

However, if you have other more specific evaluation tools, use them. **Evaluation is crucial when implementing changes.** Regularly review your action plan and timeline to ensure progress is on track. Identify obstacles hindering progress, and either eliminate them or adjust your approach as needed.

**See an example** of implementing a “Work Stress Solution” to address high job demands, and possible ways this could be evaluated (Appendix 5).

### Communicate & collaborate

Using “systems thinking” to assess healthy work is an iterative process that involves continuous learning and improvement. **Foster collaboration through a permanent “healthy work committee”** that could be part of a larger organizational structure such as Human Resources, or an executive leadership committee or a labor-management health and safety partnership. Incorporating “healthy work” and work stress prevention into employee health and well-being policy, programs and practices is an important goal. **Regularly communicate the importance of healthy work** to all levels of the organization, and the progress being made in improving employee health & safety by using any existing or implementing newsletters, webpages, email communications etc.

# STEP NINE



## PROMOTE A HEALTHY WORK CULTURE



### The work environment

**Promoting a healthy work culture requires** fostering an environment where employees feel valued, supported, and motivated. You may already know how to do many of these things such as fostering more communication between managers and employees and recognizing and rewarding employee efforts.

However, **regularly assessing work stressors** to ensure there are adequate resources and support to meet demands, identifying unreasonable workloads and hours, and creating a respectful work environment is also important.



Ensure that your mission statement or other policies, reflects the importance of a healthy work environment. For example, "Our mission is to deliver exceptional service by fostering a supportive, inclusive, and healthy workplace where all employees are treated fairly, with respect and dignity."



One way to recognize your organization's effort in promoting healthy work, adopt the Healthy Work Pledge or partner with the Healthy Work Campaign. Email us at [contact@healthywork.org](mailto:contact@healthywork.org) to learn more.

*"...fostering an environment where employees feel valued, supported, and motivated."*

# Healthy work...



reduces work stress.  
prevents burnout, illness, and injury.  
increases productivity and retention.  
reduces health costs.  
and saves lives.



## Free from Danger

Workers' personal safety is essential for productive work and engagement. Safe from injury, disease, extreme temperatures, mechanical and chemical hazards.

## Free from Abuse

Emotional, psychological, and physical abuse creates permanent damage to workers and organizations. Workers affected by workplace toxicity and bullying can develop serious health problems, costing organizations heavily in healthcare and turnover.

## Free from Discrimination

Discrimination against workers for who they are, their race, religion, color, sex/gender, age, geographic origin, or disability is illegal. Work morale is grounded in inclusion.

## Free from Overwork

Long work hours and 24/7 expectations hurt the health of workers and severely impair performance.

## Free from Being Silenced

Every voice matters, no matter the position or occupation. Workers have a right to speak as individuals and as a collective. The more say workers have, the less risk of burnout.

## Free from Retaliation

Threats of losing a job, benefits, and public shaming creates a culture of fear in the workplace that destroys morale and hurts health. Retaliation against whistleblowers covers up hazards that create organizational problems.

## Free to Grow

Rotating tasks, creating opportunities to learn new skills, and reducing repetition, boosts creativity, engagement, and retention.

## Free to Be a Family Member

The balance of work and life is essential to the mental well-being of workers. Work-Life imbalance puts families and health at risk. Paid family leave is good for families and good for business.

## Free to Thrive

Respect, fairness, and a living wage are essential to health and well-being. Paid time off to vacation, deal with illness, grieve, and take care of family — a healthy workforce is a thriving workforce.

## Commitment to a Healthy Work Future

Organizations and individuals commit to an annual assessment of work stressors, promoting improvement of work conditions, optimizing worker health, performance, and retention.

Do you support healthy work? Get involved at [healthywork.org](https://healthywork.org). 



Download PDF ([English](#) or [Spanish](#))

# Appendix 1

## Organization Systems Evaluation checklist form

This form is intended to help complete a “systems” evaluation of your organization as it relates to employee health and well-being. It is intended for internal use. Specifically it collects data on organizational structures and the systems currently in place (or missing) that address employee health and well-being.

- 1) Total number of employees: \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) Number of units/departments: \_\_\_\_\_ Do you want to survey each department or occupational group or whole organization? [  ]Yes [  ]No [  ]Unsure

3) Number of employees by department/unit (use additional sheet if needed)

4) Name of Department	Number of employees
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

5) Number of labor unions (if unionized): \_\_\_\_\_

**Compile a list of any current policies, programs and practices that are aimed at improving employee health and well-being, including any that are missing. Are there staff that might collaborate as part of the “Management Committee”?**

6) Do you currently have a Wellness Program(s)/Director? [  ]Yes [  ]No [  ]Unsure

7) Do you currently have an Occupational and Environmental Health and Safety Office or Officer? [  ]Yes [  ]No [  ]Unsure

8) Do you have a Joint Labor-Management Health & Safety/Wellness committee?  
[  ]Yes [  ]No [  ]Unsure

# Organization Systems Evaluation checklist form (cont'd)

9) Have you implemented a [Total Worker Health](#) program? [ ]Yes [ ]No [ ]Unsure

10) Do you currently have an Employee or Union Assistance Program (EAP/UAP)?  
[ ]Yes [ ]No [ ]Unsure

11) Do you have any of the following policies and/or trainings?  
(please check any that apply)

[ ] An illness and injury prevention program? Comments:\_\_\_\_\_

[ ] Workplace violence prevention program? Comments:\_\_\_\_\_

[ ] Respectful workplace policies and training (e.g. workplace sexual harassment, discrimination, bullying)? Comments:\_\_\_\_\_

[ ] Alternative Work Schedules, Flexible Work policies?  
Comments:\_\_\_\_\_

[ ] Childcare or breastfeeding provisions?  
Comments:\_\_\_\_\_

[ ] Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives?  
Comments:\_\_\_\_\_

[ ] Health and Safety policies regarding psychological health and safety?  
Comments:\_\_\_\_\_

[ ] Any other established goals related to worker health and well-being.

Comments:\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# Organization Systems Evaluation checklist form (cont'd)

## Organizational Employee Health Data:

12) Workers' compensation claims in last 12 mos: \_\_\_\_\_%up/down\_\_\_\_\_

13) Disability claims filed in last 12 mos: \_\_\_\_\_ %due to mental health\_\_\_\_\_

14) Number of staff voluntarily separating in last 12 mos: \_\_\_\_\_ %\_\_\_\_\_

15) Any rise in health care premium costs from Group Plans? [  ]Yes [  ]No [  ]Unsure

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

You may use this data to communicate with Senior Leadership regarding current programs and policies in place, or trends that indicate a concern about employee health and well-being. You can also use it to communicate with the Healthy Work Campaign regarding the number of employees to be surveyed and the number of departments that you may require separate surveys reports for.

Questions? [contact@healthywork.org](mailto:contact@healthywork.org)

Step 1

# Appendix 2

## Leadership Readiness Assessment (LRA)

Evaluate your organization's leadership preparedness for implementing the Healthy Work Survey, devising solutions to work stress, and prioritizing employee health and safety. If you score less than 6 points, please email us at [contact@healthywork.org](mailto:contact@healthywork.org), and check out the resources for improving leadership buy-in.

This assessment is NOT a prerequisite to conducting the Healthy Work Survey, but it can help to improve leadership buy-in.

1. Does management believe they have a problem with work stress in your organization?

Yes (1 point)

No

Not sure

2. Is senior management open to implementing the Healthy Work Survey to all employees to assess the level of work stress?

Yes (1 point)

No

Not sure

3. Is senior management open to disseminating the aggregate HWS findings report generated by the Healthy Work Campaign to employees?

Yes (1 point)

No

Not sure

4. Does the leadership employ an effective communication strategy, regularly updating employees on relevant resources, programs, and policies that impact the workforce?

Yes (1 point)

No

Not sure

## Leadership Readiness Assessment (LRA) (cont'd)

**5.** Is senior management committed to implement interventions that address the underlying causes of stress within this workplace?

Yes (1 point)

No

Not sure

**6.** Does your organizational culture actively promote employee involvement in decision-making processes?

Yes (1 point)

No

Not sure

**7.** Does organizational culture actively promote employees' health and well-being?

Yes (1 point)

No

Not sure

**8.** Will senior management actively endorse a participatory approach to developing solutions, by establishing an employee committee (or other form of employee participation) to collaborate with management and/or consultants, in formulating financially responsible, and feasible solutions to work stress?

Yes (1 point)

No

Not sure

**9.** Is senior management prepared to assess the proposed intervention(s), commit to implementation of changes for a duration of at least 6-12 months, and engage with employees for ongoing evaluation, communication and support?

Yes (1 point)

No

Not sure

Step 2

## Leadership Readiness Assessment (LRA) (cont'd)

**10.** Does your organization have individuals with expertise in safety and health who can facilitate the management committee or oversee the establishment of an employee committee (if desired)?

Yes (1 point)

No

Not sure

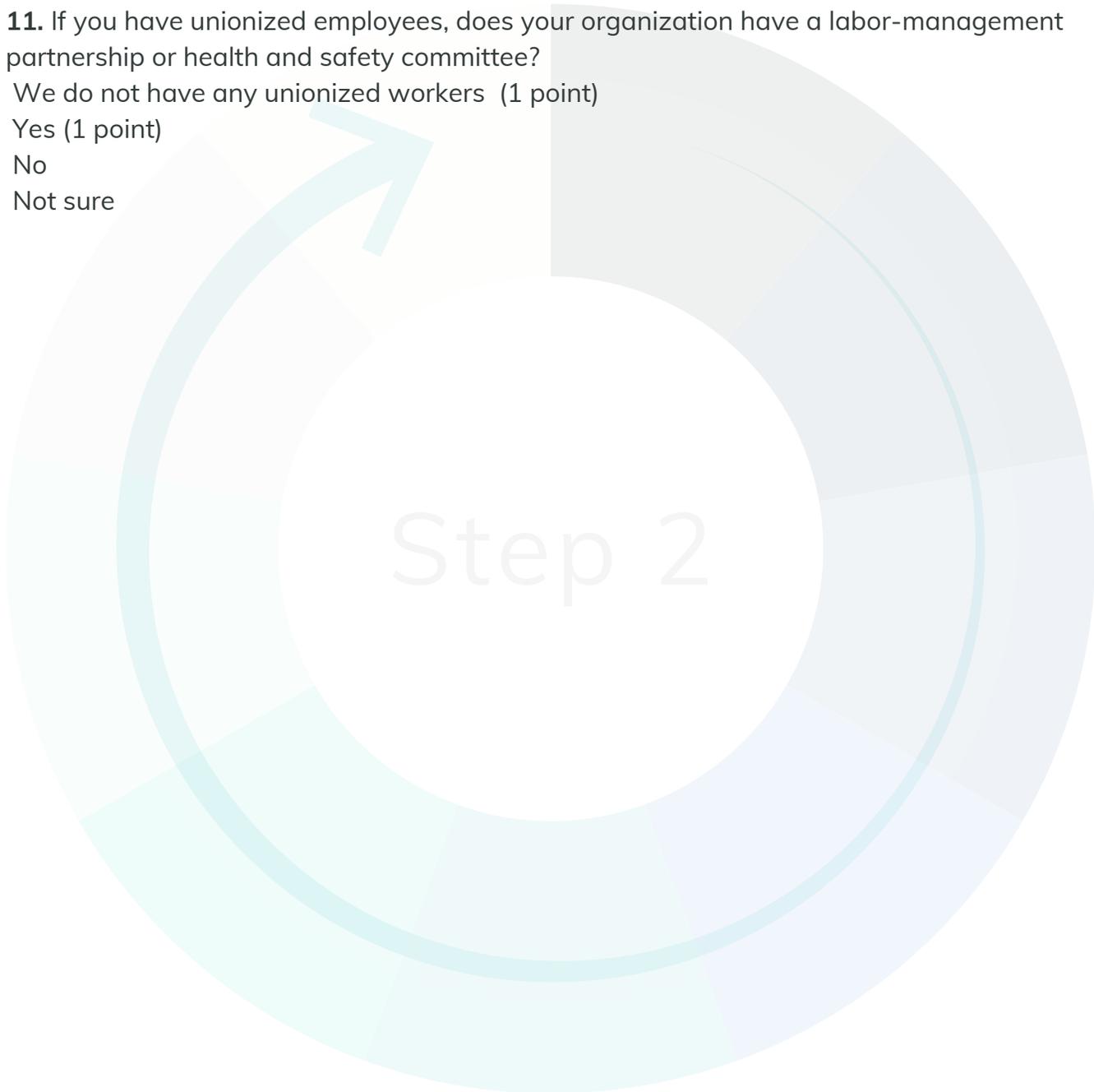
**11.** If you have unionized employees, does your organization have a labor-management partnership or health and safety committee?

We do not have any unionized workers (1 point)

Yes (1 point)

No

Not sure



Step 2

# Appendix 3

## How to Conduct the Healthy Work Survey

To start implementing the HWS for an organization, you can “Request Access” using [a short form](#) on the [www.healthywork.org](http://www.healthywork.org) website. We will contact you and set up a unique link just for your organization, which you can then email out to all employees.

Before launching the survey, it is important to communicate with all levels of the organization (employees, supervisors, managers and labor unions where applicable) about the purpose of the HWS and its implementation plan. Use various communication channels, such as: email, morning announcements, flyers, text, work apps etc. The preliminary communication should include, the purpose of the HWS, when and how employees will receive the survey, the expected time to complete it (15-20 minutes), assurance of anonymity, how the data will be utilized, and whether time will be provided at work to answer the survey on work time.

Please see this [example](#) of a communication letter you can use to accompany the survey link.

You may need to send out multiple announcements to ensure that the message has been received by all employees. Make sure employees at all levels of the organization receive and have access to the survey link either through email, SMS text, or via a link on an internal work app, or website.

If desired, organizations can request multiple survey links in order to receive separate reports for different departments, facilities or regions. A report will be generated as long as there are more than 10 responses for a given unit, so that confidentiality can be assured. These reports can also be combined into an overall report(s).

The benefit of the survey to the organization increases as the percentage of employees answering the survey increases. We recommend trying to get at least 50-60% participation to have data that is representative. It is in the best interest of the company to provide work time to answer the questionnaire.

# How to Conduct the Healthy Work Survey (cont'd)

## Incentives

Incentives may be used to encourage participation if anonymity and confidentiality can remain assured. Employees must feel secure enough to participate and share their honest experiences with their employer. An example of an incentive, is to offer those participating by completing the survey, the opportunity to participate in a gift card or other prize drawing(s), by providing a link at the end of the survey to provide their name and email address. While this will mean that employers can tell who participated, this data is kept separately from their survey data.

## Closing the survey & receiving the report

Allow enough time for employees at all levels to complete the survey. Send reminders and ask supervisors and managers to remind their staff. Allow at least 14-21 days to complete the survey. The Healthy Work Campaign monitors your response rate and will inform you of your progress and can recommend increasing the time the survey is available to up to a month if needed. When you have at least 50-60% participation, the HWC team will close the survey (if the organization is in agreement) and will provide an aggregate (group-level) report of your findings.

The [HWS Organization Report results](#) are provided as a PowerPoint presentation which can easily be adapted and presented to the executive leadership team, or the “management committee” (if established), labor unions and labor relations (where applicable), and to employees. The report highlights the major findings based on HWC experts determining and highlighting areas with the highest levels of work-related stress risk, to guide and prioritize solutions. The key findings are color-coded, ranging from green (low and intermediate risk) to red (high risk).

# Appendix 4

## Details on achieving employee participation

These are three recommendations for soliciting ideas about solutions from employees. There may be other forms or participation you can use also.

- A. Form an “employee-only committee”:** Evidence shows that employees will not likely be comfortable discussing work stress and health issues in front of managers. Therefore creating a safe space to do so will be more likely to provide more helpful information. The purpose is to discuss the HWS Report findings and the 2-3 priorities proposed by senior management. They may also consult with the HWC if needed. It is anticipated that the committee should meet at least 2-3 times (60 minutes/meeting) prior to creating a proposal to share with management.

**Recruitment:** Participants should be recruited through self-nomination or nomination by peers or union leadership. It is important for management NOT to appoint staff, but that staff volunteer and be given time to attend these committee meetings during work time. The committee should strive to represent all levels of employment to the fullest extent possible, with a maximum size of ten members.

**NOTE:** If your organization has union-represented employees, or if employee unions are partnering in the survey implementation, it is advisable to ask the union leadership to set up or have representatives participate in an “employee committee.” If there is a joint-labor management committee, this committee could take on the task of forming an employee committee.

The committee is encouraged to review and utilize the HWC resources available, including the ["Solutions by Stressor" info sheets](#) and ["Healthy Work Strategies Case Studies"](#) found on the Healthy Work Campaign website. These resources should be examined in relation to the major priorities identified in the HWS findings, as well as any additional concerns raised by employees, unions, and management during the dissemination phase.

## Details on achieving employee participation (cont'd)

Designing and planning solutions is a crucial task for the committee, they might consider the following:

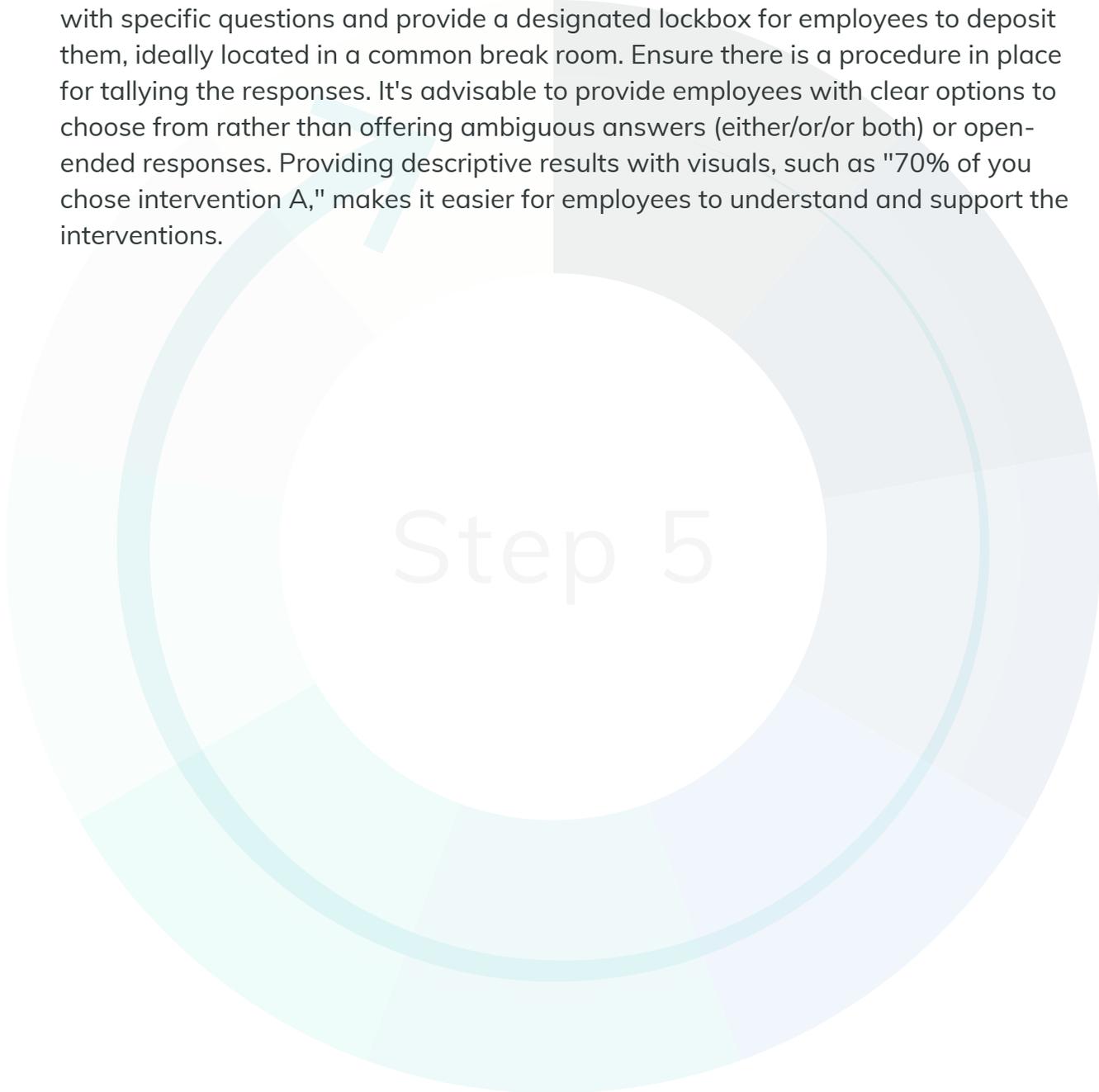
- What might help improve my own experiences with issues such as workload, low rewards or promotions, or support? However, they also need to consider their coworkers and the organization as a whole.
- Which work stress solutions might have the most significant impact on worker health (e.g. addressing job demands, workplace bullying, or safety climate). These are the points where solutions can create positive ripple effects throughout the organization.
- Think about the scope (how many employees are at risk) and impact (how many employees could be helped) - using findings from the HWS.
- Is the solution cost effective/feasible?
- How to evaluate the changes implemented?

It's highly recommended to review the CPH-NEW- [Healthy Work Participatory Program Guide](#), which provides comprehensive audio and video instructions, forms, and steps to follow and form and facilitate an employee committee.

- B. Focus Groups:** In situations where establishing an employee committee is not feasible, whether due to the company's size, geographic dispersion, or the nature of the work, consider forming focus groups led by non-management staff or external facilitators. Within these focus groups, share the HWS data to foster discussions with employees to help “translate” and prioritize the findings and on proposing solutions. Facilitators should record and analyze focus group conversations with participants' consent, ensuring confidentiality, before sharing the findings with management. Encourage employees to consider all levels of the organization, not just their own, and propose solutions that are feasible and achievable given the available resources. The facilitator will then write a report identifying the common issues and solutions proposed.

## Details on achieving employee participation (cont'd)

- C. **Anonymous feedback:** You can also propose solutions based on the selected priority areas reported in the HWS report and ask employees to anonymously rank which areas should be addressed first. Additionally, you can pose open-ended questions to gather individual recommendations from employees. Compile this data and determine which interventions to focus on based on their scope and impact. Short, anonymous online forms are an effective means of collecting feedback, particularly if employees have access to workplace apps or email. Alternatively, distribute pen and paper forms with specific questions and provide a designated lockbox for employees to deposit them, ideally located in a common break room. Ensure there is a procedure in place for tallying the responses. It's advisable to provide employees with clear options to choose from rather than offering ambiguous answers (either/or/both) or open-ended responses. Providing descriptive results with visuals, such as "70% of you chose intervention A," makes it easier for employees to understand and support the interventions.



Step 5

# Appendix 5

## Example of a SOLUTION and EVALUATION process

**The Problem:** An excessive workload, tight deadlines, and long hours significantly contribute to stress. Adequate staffing is an important solution to these stressors, but may be a long term goal affected by multiple constraining factors. Employees often feel overwhelmed by the volume of work they must complete within a limited timeframe. In many organizations, these issues can be exacerbated by unstructured communication, such as too many meetings, unclear expectations, and unnecessary discussions, which waste time and prevent employees from completing their tasks, leading to extended work hours.

### **Solutions:**

- 1 - Reduce the Number of Meetings:** Propose more effective meeting strategies. Sometimes, information can be conveyed via email instead of holding a meeting.
- 2 - Improve Management Support:** Train managers on setting realistic expectations for employees. They should understand job priorities and the time required to complete tasks, allowing employees to provide input on timelines. Avoid assigning too many projects with overlapping deadlines.
- 3 - Streamline Reporting:** Ensure that employees report to a single supervisor who is responsible for evaluating their work. This prevents employees from being caught between multiple managers, which can lead to stress and hinder performance.

### **Evaluate:**

- 1 - Reduction in Number of Meetings:**  
Track Meeting Frequency and Duration: Monitor the number of meetings held and their duration before and after the intervention. Use tools like calendar analytics to gather this data.
- 2 - Employee Feedback:** Conduct anonymous feedback forms regarding the necessity and productivity of meetings.
- 3 - Meeting Outcomes:** Assess the outcomes and action items from meetings to determine if they are more focused and productive post-intervention.

## Example of a SOLUTION and EVALUATION process (cont'd)

### Training Management:

- 1 - Performance Reviews: Evaluate changes in employee performance reviews and feedback regarding management expectations and clarity.
- 2 - Completion Rates: Monitor the completion rates of projects and tasks, noting any improvements in meeting deadlines and prioritizing work.

### Streamlining Reporting:

- 1 - Stress and Job Satisfaction Metrics: Use HWS to measure changes in employee stress levels.
- 2 - Performance Metrics: Track key performance indicators (KPIs) related to productivity, such as task completion times, error rates, and overall work quality. Improvement in these metrics can indicate reduced stress and clearer accountability.
- 3 - HR Metrics: Track metrics such as absenteeism, turnover rates, and employee engagement. Improvement in these areas can indicate successful interventions.
- 4 - Productivity Metrics: Measure changes in productivity metrics, such as the number of tasks completed on time, project completion rates, and overall efficiency.
- 5 - Qualitative Feedback: Conduct focus groups or one-on-one interviews with employees to gain deeper insights into the impact of these interventions. This involves seeking feedback from workers (employee committee, focus groups, anonymous feedback). Use the data and feedback collected to adapt solutions and strategies as needed.

By systematically collecting and analyzing these data points, you can measure the effectiveness of the interventions and make informed adjustments as needed.

Steps  
6-8

# Appendix 6

## Healthy Work Survey Confidentiality and Security

### Organizations:

The Work Stress Solutions Guide for Employers, the Healthy Work Survey and other resources on the [www.healthywork.org](http://www.healthywork.org) website are free resources provided by the Center for Social Epidemiology, for companies and public sector organizations. All information is provided for use under the [Terms and Conditions](#) set forth on the website.

Once organizations “request access” to the Healthy Work Survey by completing the form, they are agreeing to these [Terms and Conditions](#). We collect the name, job title, and contact information of a designated representative who will receive the unique URL for the HWS for that organization. This information is collected solely to serve logistical purposes of conducting the HWS for an organization. Each organization requesting access to the survey is given a specific code (e.g. HWS321). This code is used to designate which employees are part of the organization completing the HWS in the database so that the report may be generated.

The HWC does not publicize or disclose in any way the data from a single organization except to the designated representative who receives an aggregated, de-identified descriptive report of findings. Some organizations have and may request a collaboration with the HWC to publicize or present their results more widely. This decision is made on a case-by-case basis.

The HWC does not release the raw data to organizations unless specifically requested by the organization and agreed upon by the HWC and Center for Social Epidemiology. If organizations have a small number of employees and confidentiality cannot be assured, then raw data will not be released by the HWC to that organization. Final decisions regarding the confidentiality of individual data lie with HWC experts.

# Healthy Work Survey Confidentiality and Security (cont'd)

## Individual Participants:

The Healthy Work Survey has been approved by an independent institutional review board ([BRANY SBER](#) RH #2023-101). Participation by individuals in the Healthy Work Survey should be voluntary unless it is required as part of an employer-sponsored training system. However, even then individuals can refuse to answer specific questions by discontinuing the survey at any time. Survey data is not saved until the survey is completed and submitted at the end. Therefore, employers will not know which employees have completed the survey or not, which protects employee anonymity.

Personal identifying information (names or employee ID numbers etc.) is not collected as part of the Healthy Work Survey. However, individuals may choose to provide a non-work email address if they wish to receive a free, confidential personal report of results. This email address is deleted after the report is sent and not stored with the individual's survey data. Individual participants are also asked if they give their permission to be contacted by the Healthy Work Campaign via their email in the future. The email addresses for those who agree are stored in a separate file from the survey data.

## Data Security

All data is collected using Google Forms, which offers a number of security features, including:

- Encryption: Google Forms uses industry-standard encryption to protect data in transit and at rest, meaning that your data is encrypted when it is being transmitted between your computer and Google's servers, and when it is stored on Google's servers.
- Audit logging: Google Forms keeps a log of all activity on your forms, including who accessed the form, when they accessed it, and what actions they took. This can help you track any suspicious or unauthorized activity.
- Regular security updates: Google regularly releases security updates for its products, including Google Forms. These updates help to fix any security vulnerabilities that are discovered.

In addition to Google's security features, we have also restricted access to the Google Form to only two accounts, both of which have two-factor authentication enabled. This further reduces the risk of unauthorized access.

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Reduce harmful work stressors.  
Improve job quality and health.

# ABOUT US

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## HWC Work Stress Solutions Guide Team

The Healthy Work Campaign is a public health campaign focused on raising awareness in the U.S. about the health impacts of work stress on working people. The campaign also develops tools and strategies to guide organizations throughout the U.S. to achieve healthier work and improve employee health and well-being. It was launched in 2019, by the Center for Social Epidemiology (CSE). The CSE is a 501c3 private, nonprofit foundation, established in 1988 by Dr. Peter Schnall, its Executive Director.

### [Marnie Dobson, Ph.D](#)

is currently the Program Director of the Healthy Work Campaign and co-developer of the work stress solutions guide. She is an expert in the science of work stress research and is the lead consultant for the Healthy Work Campaign, working with many organizations to recommend workplace improvements to reduce or prevent sources of stress.

### [Peter Schnall, M.D., MPH](#)

is the Founder and Director of the Center for Social Epidemiology and co-Director of the Healthy Work Campaign. An internist and epidemiologist, Peter has been studying the impact of working conditions on the development of hypertension among workers for over 40 years.

### [Pouran Faghri, M.D., MS, FACSM](#)

is the Director of Dissemination and Implementation at the Healthy Work Campaign. Her role as co-developer of the work stress solutions guide benefits from her expertise in occupational health and safety and exposure hazards (physical and psychological) evaluation at the workplace. Over the years, she has developed and evaluated multiple cost-effective models for integrating health and safety interventions with workplace injury prevention and occupational ergonomics for health protection.

### **Special thanks for the expert input from the rest of our team:**

[Paul Landsbergjs, Ph.D.](#)

[David LeGrande, M.S., RN](#)

Maria Doctor, Content and Project Manager

Thank you for doing your  
part to reduce work stress  
and make work healthier.



HEALTHY WORK CAMPAIGN

Healthy work - Healthy people

**Work Stress Solutions: A Guide**  
is a resources developed for the  
Healthy Work Campaign.

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