



## How Secrets Make Workers Sick

*Insecurity at work is a detriment to employee health & productivity*

The three most over-used words in the past few years are “in this economy”. That phrase begins or ends countless discussions and has become a tagline for the challenge of getting and keeping a good job since the start of the Great Recession. You may even use it yourself on occasion.

The mentality behind the phrase is simple: Times are tough, and people need to be braced to face difficulty and uncertainty at work. Unfortunately, our newfound culture of fear about the state of our economy has led many employers to withdraw and become less communicative about the state of their businesses and the status of their workforce. While it seems logical to want to avoid scaring the masses by sharing the gritty details and financial challenges the company is facing, keeping such information secret is doing much more harm than good.

When employees aren't kept in the loop, they know it. People aren't stupid, and no news is most certainly not good news. Instead, “in this economy”, no news is an entirely legitimate reason to freak the heck out.

Add in the inherent stress of the upcoming holiday season, and you've got a storm more perfect than Sandy threatening to do some irreparable damage to many workplaces.

If you want to salvage some productivity and actually help employees maintain a higher level of health, you need to start talking to start limiting worker stress. Communication is the only tool employers have to help undermine the pervasive insecurities in today's workforce. Even the most secure workers know better than to get too comfortable – for many employees, they still feel it's only a matter of time until the hammer drops. Are you taking any steps to help alleviate these fears and allow your workers to shed some of the stress associated with this insecurity?

A September 2012 article published by the American College of Occupational & Environmental Medicine highlights the real-time effects of insecurity. It's definitely worth a read.

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### **Job Insecurity Affects Health, Michigan Study Finds**

*After Recession, Job Worries Take a Toll on Health*

Workers who perceive their jobs aren't secure are more likely to rate themselves in poor health and have increased symptoms of anxiety and depression, reports the September *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, official publication of the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM).

Sarah A. Burgard, PhD, and colleagues of University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, analyzed data on about 440 working-aged adults living in southeast Michigan in 2009-10. The analysis was part of a larger study to assess the impact of the recent economic recession and ongoing recovery on the lives of workers in the Detroit area, which was hit particularly hard by the "Great Recession."

Nearly 18 percent of workers perceived their job was insecure — they felt it was at least "fairly likely" that they would lose their job or be laid off within the next year. Workers with job insecurity rated their health lower than workers who perceived their jobs as more secure — they were nearly three times more likely to rate their health as fair to poor.

Workers with job insecurity were nearly four times more likely to report symptoms of anxiety attacks, and close to seven times more likely to have symptoms suggesting minor or major depression. These effects were significant after adjustment for other characteristics.

The study adds to previous research linking job insecurity to poorer health. This could have a major impact on population health in the wake of the recent economic recession — especially with the "jobless recovery" and continued high unemployment rates.

"The study provides some of the first available evidence on the extent and distribution of perceived job insecurity and its association with health in the wake of the Great Recession," Dr. Burgard and coauthors write. They call for interventions targeting the large number of people who may be suffering the mental and physical health effects of job worries. Especially with the slow recovery, they add, "perceptions of job insecurity may persist for some time."

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This idea shouldn't surprise us. It's common sense that fear for one's job leads to stress, and the recent medical research on the negative health effects of stress is astounding. People are sicker, less happy, less productive, and less functional when stress takes over. The Michigan study just echoes what most of us already know. Taking that knowledge into action at work is an entirely different story.

Business leaders spend so much of their day trying to right the ship and ensure that the business is taken care of that they may not realize the impact of secretive communication. At least when everyone is together, a sinking ship isn't quite so scary. And even businesses who are faring just fine "in this economy" can benefit from a more open communication policy. Share your success, encourage your employees, and don't keep secrets – unless you work at Kentucky Fried Chicken. That secret recipe should be kept forever...

#### *Sources:*

**Author** - Burgard SA, Kalousova L, Seefeldt KS. Perceived job insecurity and health: the Michigan Recession and Recovery Study. *J Occup Environ Med.* 2012;54(9):1101-6.

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