



On the Road Again...

Employers have an obligation to ensure the workplace environment neither exacerbates nor contributes to the onset of employee mental health problems. Here's what that means for tower construction and maintenance employers.

By Dr. Bridgette Hester

Preliminary data from tower climbers indicates they average 210 to 300 days of travel per year. The small number of climbers in the antenna-site industry and the nature of the job make an extraordinary number of travel days inevitable. You who use the services of tower climbers are aware of this, so why should I mention it? Although you may be aware of the copious amount of employee travel, are you aware of how it affects your climbers, their families, productivity levels

and your bottom line? The focus for most employers tends to be almost exclusively on the bottom line; however, research has proven that the extensive amounts of travel your climbers endure can take a toll on every aspect of your business.

The human element is always (at least it should be) more important than the bottom line. In that spirit, I will illustrate how the human factor — your employees — affects all elements of your business, including your bottom line.

Human Element—the Employee

Your most valuable asset is your technicians. Without them, you don't have a business. Being mindful and intimately aware of the human element that drives your business is not only smart, it's sound business practice. Not being mindful of this element can risk your company's reputation. With the prolific use of social media, one intentional or blatant disregard for an employee's safety or health could easily place a

business on a social media wall of shame. Employers have not only a responsibility to their checkbooks and bottom lines, but also a moral and legal responsibility to protect their employees and provide them a healthy and safe working environment.

personal level, you provide not just monetarily, but you also demonstrate moral support for the time they spend away from their families.

Travel is part of the job, and frequently travel is for extended periods. There are men and women in this

absorb some information. Place yourself in the shoes of the people driving and building your business. Read. Reflect. Ponder. Then, consider making some changes in order for your company to become employee-focused, if it's not already.

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Two hundred plus days on the road is detrimental physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually to the technician. An employee-focused company will provide equipment and training and invest in its men and women. In doing so, you create a solid foundation of mutual respect and integrity that your men and women can appreciate. When you invest in them on a

industry who do not mind the travel and in some cases thrive on it. However, more often than not, your employees have extended families: wives, husbands, children, mothers, fathers, siblings, nieces, nephews. It's potentially easy to lose sight of this while you land the contracts and focus on the business. This is an opportunity to take a moment and

Family Life and Relationships

I was one of those wives of tower climbers. My late husband Jonce Hubble's employer was respectful of our home life and the need for family members to spend time with one another. Although my husband's travel was fairly extensive during certain seasons, the management at the company that employed him usually limited his travel to two to three weeks at a time with a few weeks between jobs. I believe that this was due to the family atmosphere created by his employer. The owners of the company and its

Suggestions From Climbers and their Spouses

Keep the jobs local (#1 response).

Keep the jobs to 2-3 weeks.

Give time off for family emergencies.

Give time off to be home on the holidays at a decent time, not the same day or hours beforehand.

Provide the climbers with Skype to have face-to-face time with family when they have to be away from home for extended periods.

Provide ticket/gas money or a hotel room for spouses or children one time per month if they will be away from home longer than two months.

Provide employee paid outings to which spouses are invited (picnics, company vacations as a company).

Give a bit more per diem.

I was out for eight months, five to six days at a time, and home for two to three days at a time, and then flew right back out. A paid week off would have been really nice. All I did was sleep when I did go home because I was so tired. This left me no real time to spend with the wife and kids. This is not good for a family man.

If married, but no children, allow the spouse to travel with the climber.

Allot the climber a family separation pay bump after an agreed upon number of days (30 or 60 days).

Try harder to find people willing to learn the trade in the areas they send us away to.

Offer higher compensation.

Rotate crews of climbers to reduce the amount of time spent on the road.



likelihood of divorce and instability.

Stress at work spills over into the family environment. Furthermore, jobs that provoke poor interpersonal family relationships and negative familial outcomes include jobs with rotating shifts, irregular and extended periods away from family, and jobs that conflict with the spouse's work schedule. Jobs that require extensive periods of separation are also positively correlated with negative familial effects, such as role confusion and role and personal realignment.

Mental Health

Work can be a valuable and wonderful source of accomplishment and self-efficacy, and its positive benefits have been recorded for years in academic research. Work provides needed encouragement and an increase in self-esteem, and it provides people with a sense of accomplishment and pride. However, work that requires attention to mentally and physically demanding conditions, that is dangerous or life threatening, or that involves extensive amounts of travel can also create, exacerbate and reactivate mental health disorders in employees.

Extensive periods of travel and demanding and sometimes dangerous physical demands are commonplace in the telecommunications industry. Although employees agree to these conditions upon hire, it is the responsibility of the employer to monitor employee health to ensure the employees are not pushed to the breaking point. Mental health issues are extremely serious. They have devastating effects on families if left unaddressed. It is the responsibility of the employer and the employee to work together to address problems that affect the worker and the worker's family. Mental

managers cared about employees' spouses and children. They were genuinely concerned about the emotional and mental health effects of extensive travel on their employees' families. We had it better than most. I think Jonce might have traveled 150 to 175 days a year, maybe a bit more every other year or so.

I think of the families separated from their loved ones for 200, 250, 300 or more days a year and I shudder. Even though Jonce's travel was relatively light in comparison with most climbers, we still had problems with time lost in the relationship, not feeling an emotional connectedness after extensive periods of travel, parenting difficulties, money problems, loneliness, depression, anxiety and feelings

of abandonment. When I consider how those problems would have been intensified or how the problems could have spiraled out of control if his travel schedule had been much worse, it leaves me wondering. How do other climbers' relationships and marriages survive? A lot of times, they don't.

Research reveals the detrimental effects extensive travel and work-related pressures have on families. Extended periods away from home can have significantly negative effects on the psychological well-being of one's spouse. Extended periods away from home also affect the quality of relationships between spouses, between the absent parent and their children, and increased levels of marital discord and dissatisfaction. These also increase the

health problems, whether pre-existing or developed over time, affect both the employee and the family left at home.

In her book *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*, Pauline Boss reported that when one spouse is away from home for extended periods, the home-based spouse is often left to constantly adjust, taking on the duties and responsibilities of the absent parent, often without the support and encouragement that defines the intimate relationship of marriage. Furthermore, Boss wrote that the constant readjustment and the frequent comings and goings of the traveling spouse can increase the likelihood of feelings of abandonment and mental health issues.

Other researchers reported lower rates of marital satisfaction and higher rates of turbulent relationships with children. Additionally, several research studies have found that absence from the home for extended periods and work responsibilities perceived by the home-based spouse as excessive or demanding increase the likelihood for higher depression rates, irritability and loneliness — symptoms similar to that of post-traumatic stress disorder, mood problems and disorders, lack of energy, loss of a sense of personal control and other mental health problems.

Self-Medicating

It's no secret that the tower construction and maintenance industry has an embedded drug culture, and to say otherwise is putting your head in the sand. I am by no means stating that every climber uses drugs. I don't believe that to be the case. I am also not stating that every climber who uses drugs is doing so for mental health reasons or to self-medicate. Sadly, there are those who use drugs for no

other reason than to get high.

Let's save a thorough discussion of drug abuse in the tower construction and maintenance industry for another time. However, I do want to focus on mental health as a function of drug use. Given that people self-medicate for a variety of reasons and that there is a mountain of research affirming drug use to mitigate mental health problems and symptoms, it is not unreasonable to assume that a certain percentage of climbers use drugs as a coping mechanism. This perceived need to self-medicate may stem from a variety of reasons, many of which

as a belligerent attitude, poor work performance, legal costs, increases in insurance premiums and OSHA investigations. Beyond these possibilities, you have an employee choosing to self-medicate instead of seeking help for the problems that may have led to one or more addictions.

Employers do not need to babysit their employees. Employers are not responsible for every problem an employee has, and in fact may not be responsible for any of them. Nor should the employer take on the responsibility for someone else's

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could have nothing to do with the job. Some employers do not address the areas in their business that could cause problems or that could exacerbate employees' mental health problems. When climbers are forced to work for extensive periods away from home and away from stabilizing factors in their lives, it multiplies potential problems, most of which are costly not only for your company, but also for the well-being of your employees.

A self-medicating employee may engage in unsafe activities, such as showing up at the jobsite high or drunk, climbing while under the influence, driving while under the influence or committing acts of violence. Employees who are under the influence have the potential to injure or kill themselves or others on the job. This could lead to other problems, such

choices. Do I tolerate climbers using drugs or other substances, even in their off time? Absolutely not. However, I believe that employers have an obligation (maybe not legal, but moral) to ensure the workplace environment neither exacerbates nor contributes to the onset of employee mental health problems. The choices you make as an employer don't affect just you, they affect everyone. I know the job has to get done, I know that the deadline was three weeks ago, and I know that you need your business to become bigger and to produce more income. I also believe that if your employees are traveling too much and pushing too hard, and if the company is growing fast at the expense of you and your employees, you are doing yourself a disservice.



helping employees feel appreciated and taking a part in supporting your employees' family lives is not only the moral thing to do, it's the smart thing to do. Creating a family-oriented culture allows your employees to feel confident that they can come to you with a problem. That atmosphere creates a far more productive work environment than one in which employees feel as though they have to avoid you, self-medicate or lie about things that affect their work. Working together improves morale and productivity, increases job satisfaction and reduces turnover. It requires you to create something new, which can be a challenge. I hope all businesses within this industry strive to make these improvements.

As the president of Hubble Foundation, I deal with the families of the fallen. I also deal with the active climbers and their families, several of whom volunteer for me on a regular basis. They tell me what they want. Most climbers want a solid employer that cares about them. As a whole, tower climbers feel like no one cares about them, the jobs they perform and the personal sacrifices they make in terms of family to do what needs to be done. As an employer, your company should have a vested interest in wanting to create a solid and positive atmosphere for both you and your employees.

About the Author:

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Bottom Line

You know better than I do what technical aspects affect your bottom line, but there are problems that affect your bottom line that I know you might not be aware of. These are problems you might consider to be incidental or unrelated; you just deal with them as they present themselves. Problems like traffic tickets, traffic accidents, company vehicle maintenance, lower worker productivity caused by fatigue, mental health concerns, minor workplace injuries, self-medication by employees, anger and resentment.

These problems affect not only workers, but also your business. Extended travel can cause workers to become stressed and distracted, and they may not perform to the best of their ability. That, in turn, could mean your sites are a mess, equipment isn't installed as it should be, and workers may attempt to take shortcuts to get the job done. Those conditions adversely affect your company. You will experience reduced productivity, turnover, lost jobs and

jobs not performed correctly. In other words, lost revenue. Besides the business effects, you probably will be left with some cranky climbers who are no fun to be around, much less to manage.

Years of research have demonstrated that the morale of employees has a direct relationship to productivity. If employees don't feel appreciated or if they feel taken advantage of, productivity goes down, revenue suffers, workplace environments become tense, and the working relationships between you and your climbers is going to take a serious hit. Everyone loses. In that spirit, I have taken comments and emails from climbers on how they feel about this particular topic. Suggestions from climbers and their spouses are on page 49.

Depending on company size, some of these suggestions are not feasible for every business in the industry, and that is understandable. The list offers a way for you to generate your own ideas to improve your relationships with your employees. Improving the workplace,