Is Low Level Noise Affecting Your Workers' Productivity?

Noise is usually defined as unwanted sound. The workplace is full of unwanted sounds that bombard an employee's ears over the course of the day, many of which can be classified as low level. Although much more attention has been paid to the effect of repeated loud noises because of the medical and psychological problems they cause, new studies have shown that low-level noise can increase stress and decrease employee productivity.

Any noise consists of relatively small changes in atmospheric pressure. These changes are picked up by the eardrum and carried to hair cells in the inner ear. The hair cells then convert the pressure changes to electrical pulses which are sent to the brain. The brain translates these electrical pulses into meaningful sounds. In order for noise-induced damage to occur, the total amount of energy received by the ear's hair cells over time must be substantial. This also means that as noise becomes louder, sending larger amounts of energy to the hair cells in the ear, it causes damage in less time.

Relatively low noise levels, like those in offices, result from the way the interior of the workplace is constructed and the type of activities that take place there. Low noise levels are not capable of causing noise-induced hearing loss. However, they are known to cause adverse health effects.

One of these adverse effects is stress. People may experience stress in different ways. For example, stress can take the form of fatigue, anxiety, depression, hostility or aggression. We all know that stress can bring with it a whole host of symptoms including irritability, headaches, moodiness, insomnia and disturbance of psychomotor reactions. In addition to stress, noise may also lead to loss of concentration and speech interference.

The body will try to cope with intrusive noise by adapting its biological functions. These adjustments are made by increasing the heart rate and raising the blood pressure. Also, more hormones like adrenaline and cortisol are released into the body. Under stressful working conditions, prolonged high levels of these hormones may lead to serious health effects such as raised blood pressure and heart rate, including the risks of stroke and heart attack, reduced immune response and gastric ulcers.

Besides these health risks, low level noise can result in increased absenteeism, reduced productivity due to fatigue and low concentration and reduced quality of work, products and service.

Certainly the notion of a completely quiet work environment is not realistic. However, there are some tips to help keep noise-related stress manageable:

1. Designate noise-free areas for certain tasks or jobs that require strict concentration. Establish rules about noise level from radios or phone conversations.
2. Install noise-dampening carpets, curtains, or partitions.
3. Encourage employees to create a "sanctuary" in their office or cubicle. They should make their space relaxing and welcoming by adding plants, photos or personal desk accessories.
4. If one person seems to be the source of excessive noise, talk to him/her about it. Speak honestly, but non-judgmentally about the effect the noise is having on co-workers. It may be she/he isn't even aware of the problem.
5. Make sure your employees' workspace is ergonomically correct. You can create a healthy computer workstation, which will lessen the risk for development of repetitive strain injuries as well as keep stress levels under control.
6. Train employees in other stress-management techniques, such as good nutrition, regular exercise and a regular sleep cycle. These practices can help improve their overall resistance to noise-induced stress.