

Media release

RMIA conference speaker: manage fatigue or face liability

Fatigue risk management is vital for organisations operating 24/7 to improve employee well being and avoid liability, says Bill Sirois, senior vice-president and chief operating officer of Boston, USA-based Circadian Technologies Inc.

Mr Sirois is a keynote speaker at the Risk Management Institution of Australasia's annual conference, "*Risk management: the road to resilience*", in Cairns, north Queensland, on November 22-25.

He says companies that operate around the clock put employees at "tremendous disadvantage". Shift work creates physical stress and social conflict that diminishes quality of life and increases health and safety risks. Negative impacts for companies include increased staff turnover and absenteeism and higher health costs.

Mr Sirois said fatigue caused human error, with subsequent incidents creating high costs and potential liability. The US was seeing an increase in liability actions taken after shiftworkers had been killed driving home from work. However, he said there were risk management methodologies to mitigate the potential impact of shiftwork. They began with an assessment of existing policies, practices and procedures – many of which could be counterproductive.

Appropriate staffing levels and changing schedules to ensure employees received adequate sleep were risk mitigation techniques that could be implemented. Organisations need to alleviate burdens that inhibit human performance, he says.

He says sleep disorders are "rampant" among shiftworkers, but organisations can implement programs to overcome them, which must then be measured, monitored and tracked.

A worker must come to work fully rested, fit for duty, alert and able to sustain that for a full shift, be it eight, 10 or 12 hours. Mr Sirois said the length of a shift was not the over-riding factor, but the time at which the shift was performed. Many workers performed better with longer, but fewer shifts in a working week, because there was less cumulative fatigue.

For overworked executives and managers, Mr Sirois says the best strategy is a 20-minute power nap daily. That could equate to a four-hour boost to alertness and productivity. Mr Sirois will expand on ways to deal with sleep deprivation and fatigue when he presents at the RMIA conference. For more information or bookings, go to www.rmiaconference.com.

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