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Labor Relations

Encroachment of 'Shadow Work' Introduces New Safety, Health Hazards, Author Says

Corporations are increasingly shifting safety and health risks away from their workers and onto the general public, says the author of a new book on the "shadow work" phenomenon.

Craig Lambert, author of "Shadow Work: The Unpaid, Unseen Jobs That Fill Your Day," defines the term to include unpaid, extra duties that are foisted upon both workers who survive layoffs and members of the public. Examples include self-service checkouts at national chains like Wal-Mart and CVS and the do-it-yourself culture at retailers such as Home Depot and Ikea.

By forcing their customers to do the work that used to be performed by clerks and cashiers, American companies are realizing cost savings, and in the process are also offloading the consequences of hazardous work, Lambert told Bloomberg BNA July 6.

"Think of travelers at the airport," Lambert said. "They're being asked to tag and put their own baggage on the conveyor belt. Suppose they get their hands stuck in the conveyor belt. They're just customers; they're not trained to do this work. All those hazards are being inherited by the customer, who is now the new worker."

Job-Description Creep Impacts Safety. Because businesses that open themselves to the public are legally required to maintain reasonably safe premises, members of the public can sue for injuries incurred. But most companies simply bet they won't, said Barbara Rahke, director of the Philadelphia Area Project on Occupational Safety and Health.

"They just figure that they're playing the odds," Rahke told Bloomberg BNA July 6. "There could be one lawsuit by a customer, but they figure the odds are in their favor on that. They play Russian roulette with this stuff."

At the same time, workers who survive rounds of layoffs are often forced to take on new duties with no additional pay and often no training, Lambert said.

Such work can impose obvious safety risks on workers in dangerous industries, like health care or manufacturing, Lambert said.

"The people who are doing these jobs are, in a sense, amateurs," Lambert said. "When you're expanding the job description like that, you're getting people to do segments of work that they're not trained to do. It's the ever-expanding 'job description creep.'"

A striking example comes from the 2010 Upper Big Branch mine explosion in West Virginia. The mine's owner, Massey Energy, began expecting production crews to take on the task of rock dusting, which in the past had been the responsibility of a dedicated team, Celeste Monforton, a public health lecturer at George Washington University, told Bloomberg BNA. The ignition of coal dust and methane was at the root of the explosion, which killed 29 workers, according to the Mine Safety and Health Administration.

Safety Following Layoffs. Some safety hazards are exacerbated in the immediate wake of a mass layoff due simply to distraction, according to Wayne Cascio, a management professor at the University of Colorado, Denver, who has studied the health effects of downsizing.

"[Layoff survivors] become very narrow-minded and self-absorbed—they're asking all the 'me' questions, 'What about me, what about my future?'—and this distraction is what can lead to health consequences, particularly in jobs where safety is a major issue, like in a factory," Cascio told Bloomberg BNA July 6.

Moreover, downsizing often leads to overtime for layoff survivors, leading to fatigue, a key vector for worker injuries, Cascio said.

"You're trying to do the same amount of work with fewer people," he said. "They don't change anything else; it's not like new technology is coming in to help you get your work done. And that leads to overload and to burnout, and the health consequences associated with that."

Anger and resentment stemming from a mass layoff could also prevent remaining workers from learning new skills, increasing the risk of injury, Wayne Strom, a behavioral science professor at Pepperdine University Graziadio School of Business and Management, told Bloomberg BNA July 7.

White-Collar Workers Affected. Even in sectors not generally perceived to be dangerous, such as white-collar or creative occupations, shadow work can introduce stress by overloading people with work they may not be capable of doing, Lambert said.

"Support staff, except for people at the very top, have largely disappeared, and we've all inherited the jobs of going down to the Xerox machine and making copies, then doing various support tasks that used to be done by someone else," Lambert said.

In fact, the shadow work problem can actually be more acute in white-collar fields because they tend not to be unionized, Lambert said, giving employers far more latitude to expand workers' job descriptions.

Peter Dooley, president of safety and health consulting firm Laborsafe, said employers have no excuse not to train workers who are given new job duties.

“Ultimately we have to have programs that include workers in figuring out those challenges,” he told Bloomberg BNA July 6.

More Shadow Work Forecast. The shadow work trend is likely to continue because it makes business sense, Lambert said.

“The incentives are in place,” he said. “It’s hard in a business to add to sales, but cutting expenses is something you can do right at home. If you can cut your personnel costs and benefits by having the customer pick up the job instead of a paid person, that is a very tempting way that no well-bred capitalist can ignore.”

BY STEPHEN LEE

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