

Moon jobs will tax mental health of workers

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Think your job is tough? Can't wait for summer vacation to "get away from it all"? Just wait, says a Rutgers University—Camden researcher. In the not-too-distant future, some jobs will challenge workers placed far, far away from it all. On the moon, in fact.

According to Chester Spell, an associate professor of management at the Rutgers School of Business—Camden, the lunar settlements of tomorrow – or, for that matter, the space stations of today – carry long-term implications for the mental health of employees working in isolation for extended periods. Depression and anxiety will reach new levels among those employees, creating mental and cardiovascular health problems as well as a sharp decline in productivity.

If it sounds far-fetched, Spell notes that existing research already finds that workers in earthbound, quasi-isolated work environments, such as remote Australian mining towns or Antarctic stations, experience higher levels of depression. Just imagine, observes Spell, what might happen if those workers were placed in the extreme isolation of a lunar environment, where interaction with their coworkers may determine their very survival.

Spell presented his research about the mental health implications of working in a lunar settlement during the Rutgers Symposium on Lunar Settlements, held in New Brunswick during June 3-8.

One scenario, based on recent research by the Rutgers-Camden management scholar, suggests that depression experienced by one

worker will spread among the rest of the employee base. “The anxiety and depression of individuals working in teams relates to what co-workers think about their working conditions, above and beyond their own feelings,” explains Spell. “In other words, attitudes can spread among group members like a ‘social contagion’ and potentially lead to reduced mental health among other team members.”

While Spell’s research was not conducted in an isolated environment, he notes that under such conditions it is likely that social interaction among team members is even more critical since team members are the only source of support. “Relatively scant attention has been paid to this issue,” says Spell, who adds that “studies to date suggest that the link between isolation and worker mental health may be a critical one for a lunar base.”

Spell’s research in the area of employee health and wellness regularly appears top scholarly and professional journals worldwide. He teaches undergraduate and MBA courses related to human resource management at Rutgers-Camden.

Source: Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey

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