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Workplace stress

By Carole Spiers (Pressure Gauge)

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LAST WEEK I looked at the 'stressors' that can affect expatriates who come to live and work in Dubai - particularly those who are new to the city. The article prompted some interesting emails about how stress at work can affect individuals and organisations generally.

 Although I've touched on this in previous articles, this week I'll look in detail at the causes and effects of workplace stress; and next week at what can be done to tackle it.

The causes of stress in the organisation

The causes of stress in the workplace are many and varied, but the following (taken from my book Tolley's Managing Stress in the Workplace) will provide an idea of where some of the most important potential sources may lie.

None are insurmountable, and one of the keys to effective stress management is to maintain an awareness of where these stressors may occur - and be ready to address them before they become real problems.

- Inadequate or poor communication is one of the most common organisational stressors.
- Home and work-based stresses can both feed off and reinforce each other.
- There needs to be a balance between the work demands made on an individual, his or her ability, and the amount of control over working practices that are available to them.
- Both work overload and work 'underload' can lead to stress.
- Shift work and night work can be inherently stressful, and may lead to an increased risk of accidents.
- Home workers may feel isolated and require structured support.
- 'Hot desking' and short-term contracts bring their own particular pressures.
- Role conflict, ambiguity and changing roles all contribute greatly to stress.
- Management style needs to achieve a balance between consultation, support and control.
- Managers often need more training in communication and people skills.
- Dealing with redundancy brings its own particular specialist training requirements.
- Careful attention needs to be paid to the planning of physical workspace in order to ensure that staff are comfortable and motivated and thus more likely to perform to their maximum potential.
- The introduction of new technology, if not approached in a planned and gradual manner, can add to stress levels.
- Organisations can mistakenly encourage a culture of 'presenteeism', in which employees feel the need to be seen to be working at all times.
- A correct work-life balance is essential to good health and efficient performance.

Workplace stress is not something that if left alone will go away of its own accord. It can only be tackled through a process of consultation, identification, intervention and management, and not through short-term initiatives or one-off 'quick fixes'.

Effects of stress

- The most detrimental effects of stress include high levels of absenteeism, poor job performance, low morale, low commitment, increased incidence of accidents, difficult industrial relations, poor relationships with customers and possible litigation.
- The link between absence and stress is so well proven that non-attendance statistics are often used as an indicator of stress 'hot spots' within the organisation.
- The effect of stress on work performance is damaging to the extent that individuals suffering from high levels of it may eventually find that their powers of creativity and rational thought have been weakened.
- Where an individual is unable to perform their job to the required standard, this will eventually produce its own stress response.
- Many stress-related problems can be exacerbated as a direct consequence of management not having the required expertise to deal with them.
- Employee morale is vitally important to the success of any organisation. Low morale and lack of recognition by

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- Employee morale is vitally important to the success of any organisation. Low morale and lack of recognition by the employer will often lead to the loss of valuable trained personnel.

- Where relationship boundaries within the workplace are not clearly defined, it can lead to misunderstandings that cause undue pressure.

- Conflict can be endemic within the workplace, and if not addressed will damage both the organisation and the individuals involved.

- In its most extreme form, workplace stress can result in bullying, violence or even suicide, either within or

outside the workplace.

Top five tips to beat workplace stress

- Conduct a risk assessment. Unless you can assess the scale of the problem and where the potential sources of stress are within your organisation, you can't begin to tackle it.
- Gain commitment from the organisation. There is a lot of stigma associated with stress, and employees won't want to talk about it if they fear they will be labelled as unable to cope.
- Establish plans and follow them through. However serious you are about tackling stress, people won't believe you until they start to see genuine, tangible results.
- Assess what's working and what isn't. Stress is a complex subject, and not everything you do to try to tackle it will work first time. (I'll look in detail at this in next week's article.)
- Establish a healthy workplace culture. One where people can talk openly about the problems they face, safe in the knowledge that actions will be taken to address these.

Carole Spiers, the UK's leading Guru on corporate stress-management and organisational change, is also a regular BBC broadcaster and international author on these major, business issues. She is also a regular motivational speaker at UAE conferences. Your questions and input on this article or any related topic, is welcomed. Each Friday, we will discuss a selection of your letters or case studies. Please write to Carole Spiers at: ktwkd@emirates.net.ae. Website: www.carolespiersgroup.com



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