

Stress management in the workplace

Practical solutions for stress management in the workplace make good business sense. **CAROLE SPIERS** explains why you need to tackle work-related stress, and what your organisation should be doing to minimise it.

THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF STRESS IN THE ORGANISATION

In the UK alone 1.5m days are lost to stress each year. This costs UK employers £1.24bn. Clearly stress is a major issue for British industry. But stress is not just a British problem – it is a worldwide epidemic. Organisations should do everything they can (within reason) to reduce and ultimately minimise its effects. But what causes workplace stress, and how can its effects be realised?

The causes of stress in the workplace are many and varied, but the following will give an idea of where some of the most important potential sources may lie. None of these are insurmountable. One of the keys to effective stress management is to be aware of where these 'stressors' may occur – and be ready to address them before they become real problems.

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". As a result, stress awareness and related training are of benefit to all employees – enabling them to cope with stress at work and in their personal lives.

THE EFFECTS OF STRESS

A company's success depends upon the individuals who work for it. Stress is an extremely complex phenomenon that can affect individuals in many different ways and to differing degrees. It can, therefore, severely affect the performance of an organisation to the detriment of its staff and hence its end product or service.

As a result of this:

- 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 his/her 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 the employer will often lead to the loss of valuable trained personnel.
- Where relationship boundaries within the



workplace are not clearly defined, this 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.

WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS DO?

First and foremost, it is recommended and advisable to take a proactive approach to workplace stress. Consultation with individual employees or their representatives is mandatory. Many organisations face deadline pressures, or sudden changes in work demands brought about by new contracts, restructuring, etc, and employees need to have the necessary training and experience to meet the increasing demands made on them. Examples of how this can be achieved include training in resilience, time management, communication skills and, for managers in particular, stress awareness – enabling them to recognise the early warning signs of stress in themselves and others.

Secondly, where employees have been forced to take time away from work as a result of stress, their rehabilitation to work needs to be carefully managed. Ideally this process should be agreed with the individual employee, and managed to the mutual benefit of the employee and the organisation. (Clearly this will pay dividends in terms of the avoidance of recruitment, training and associated costs if the rehabilitation is successful.)


Thirdly, for those employees who require specialist support, Employee Assistance Programmes and employee counselling services are a vital component in employee well-being; they can also be crucial in enabling an organisation to fulfil its legal responsibilities.

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Fourthly, training in communication (and particularly active listening) skills is essential to help ensure that managers are aware of their team members' problems and are in a position to offer early interventions to resolve these.

Ultimately, reducing workplace stress is largely a matter of common sense; it means employers and employees working together for the common good. Both share a joint responsibility for reducing stress – which, when this is successful, can help employees to enjoy their work more, and businesses to thrive as a result.

Practical and cost-effective solutions for stress management in the workplace make good business sense.

It is time for industry to adopt an "open door" culture in their organisations ... it is time to enter into a constructive dialogue with employees and their representatives on how this escalating problem can best be managed ... it is time for businesses to value and recognise their employees ... and it is time for stress management to be built into the ethos and tenets of industry. It is only when these strategies are put into practice that businesses will have a chance of forging ahead in a highly competitive marketplace. 

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Major stress factors:

- 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 correct correlation 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.

Tolley's "Managing Stress in the Workplace" by Carole Spiers is an essential manager's guide to work-related stress. It is available from www.lexisnexis.co.uk price £60. ISBN: 0 7545 1269X

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