STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress is likely to become the most dangerous risk to business in the early part of the 21st century. If companies want to avoid potential legal and cost implications, they need to sit up and take notice of this very real problem that is facing organisations today.

We're all under pressure to perform at work, and indeed some of us occasionally boast that we perform far better with the added impetus of tight deadlines in a very dynamic and challenging environment. But is there a downside to such circumstances? Could we be leading our staff and ourselves to increased risks of ill health? Certainly the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) thinks so as the incidence of work-related stress has doubled since 1990, when such a relatively low level was even then considered to give real cause for concern.

The HSE has recently commissioned key research into the causes of stress related ill-health at work and has consulted widely amongst employer groups, trades unions, and both public and commercial organisations, to deliver practical methods of reducing its incidence in the workplace. Their product, "Management Standards for Work-Related Stress", has been developed from this consultation. These standards and the associated tools have been available in draft form since June of this year, and have drawn very favourable comment from nearly 1000 companies and organisations that have used them. The definitive versions were launched formally earlier this month.

The case for managing stress is compelling and there are several key factors why this should be so.

Cost to business
There is a cost to the business as a result of operating below normal capacity. Recent research in 2001/02 estimated that approximately 563,000 workers reported work related stress, depression or anxiety leading to absence or reduced productivity. Earlier research in 1999 reckoned that this had cost British business £370 million at 1995/96 prices, and the wider costs to the UK economy were estimated to be in the order of £3.7 billion.

Legal issues
The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 gave rise to the requirement for all employers to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of their workers. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 go into even greater detail about how this important task should be managed. But failing to adhere to these legal obligations in respect of managing work related stress has already landed some organisations in criminal courts, departing with hefty fines.

Impact on the victim
Early manifestations of stress induced symptoms in individuals vary between the introduction of behavioural coping mechanisms and the perhaps more obvious clinical signs. The behavioural mechanisms are personal short-term palliatives that often vary between individuals, but invariably have detrimental longer-term consequences to the person's health. Such examples are: taking up, or increasing, smoking; increased alcohol consumption; illegal substance abuse; and markedly increased (or decreased) dietary intake. The clinical symptoms reported frequently to >

Case Study 1
John, an accountant, wears a suit to work, but feels the need to keep an extra jacket on his chair at all times so that his Finance Director cannot easily check on him to monitor when he is in or out of the office. It is not that he is not pulling his weight, but every day the Finance Director works a twelve-hour day, from 7am to 7pm - and John cannot keep up.

Case Study 2
Giles, an experienced marketing manager, joined a financial company in the City of London. His contract of employment and conditions of service clearly stated that his working hours were *'9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday, with some overtime if required.'*

A year later he was working most evenings until 7 or 8pm and taking work home every weekend. One Monday morning, his wife Lisa telephoned the Marketing Director to inform him that her husband had suffered a heart attack on Saturday evening and was now in the Cardiac Care Unit of the local hospital. She had been told that Giles was lucky to have survived and that although he should make a good recovery, he was likely to be off work for the next three months.

Lisa asked why Giles had been working such long hours. She had found his contract of employment, and questioned why he was told his hours would be 9am to 5pm. She also said that she was taking legal advice.

Prior to this incident occurring, on two occasions in the previous year Giles had cancelled holiday arrangements. On the first occasion he had too much work to do and he had to be available in the office to complete a vital deal. On the second occasion his holiday was cancelled at short notice when his boss told him that he had only just remembered he had booked three weeks' holiday himself, and they both could not be out of the office at the same time.

Comment
"These case studies highlight above all else the importance of a 'healthy' corporate culture in stress avoidance and management," says Carole Spiers. *"We have a culture of 'presenteeism' in this country that many of our (more productive) European neighbours find impossible to understand. The simple fact is that longer hours do not equate to greater productivity - they result in stressed, de-motivated, uncreative and unproductive workers. Sadly, it is often only when one of these workers either suffers a serious illness or threatens litigation that their employer is forced to reconsider the way the organisation is managed - and even then they may simply shrug it off as a sign of weakness in the employee, rather than their own poor management practice."*

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'HSE Management Standards - made simple'
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> GPs are increased anxiety, inability to concentrate, inability to sleep and uncharacteristic irritability. If the stress inducing situation is not corrected, or if at the very least the stress related symptoms are left untreated, more serious personal health problems can occur, such as clinical depression, reduced immunity to infections, reduced pain thresholds and irritable bowel disorders, to name but a few. None sound particularly pleasant and all are likely to lead to an increased absence record, with the possibility that this will increase the stress on those still in work.

So what is stress?

The HSE defines it as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them". In other words, any stress factors must have a detrimental effect upon our workers for the HSE to be concerned about it. But as we mentioned earlier, some people actually thrive on it in the work environment. However, the vast majority do not and they are materially and detrimentally affected by it. People suffer and the business inevitably suffers. So how can we do something to reduce or eradicate stress in the workplace?

The HSE has defined six common stress factors for managers and employees to focus on in managing stress. Using these stress factors, the HSE has derived their new Management Standards which can be downloaded from the HSE's website at www.hse.gov.uk/stress/manstandards.htm. In fact, the HSE has devoted a whole sub-section of their website to this subject and has produced an information pack to support HR teams and managers in assessing who is affected, how they are affected, how many are affected and what can be done to alleviate the stress factors in the workplace. Not surprisingly, they advise that a workplace Risk Assessment is conducted. Although the standard Risk Assessment process, introduced by the original Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations in 1992, was criticised from some quarters as being inappropriate when used in this context, the HSE has been swift to adapt its Five Step approach specifically for assessing the risks from stress. The HSE's stress section of its website guides the reader through the practical stages in risk assessing for stress.

"A 100% stress free workplace 100% of the time is not a realistic target…"

No one really accepts that, with even the most effective management systems in place, any company can be assured that stress will not affect adversely any of its workers. That is too idealistic because, quite simply, we are all different individuals who, having individual

needs, are affected differently by similar stimuli and will react in different ways to those stimuli. A 100% stress free workplace 100% of the time is not a realistic target, so even the most proactive management teams must make time to assess, and from time to time reassess, whether there is a stress problem in the workplace. They may even find that although the perception of the workforce is that there is a stress problem, the actual observation demonstrates that there is not. The HSE's Management Standards, whilst not demanding or indeed expecting, a complete eradication of stress in the workplace, do provide a flexible mechanism to assess and, where necessary, set goals to improve stress related problems. This can be achieved within the smallest of companies, because the process involves the workforce in not only assessing the scale of the problem, but also in defining its solution.

"Matching people to jobs, or indeed jobs to people, is an essential element of preventing work-induced stress."

Although we are never going to be able to eradicate totally the issue of stress at work, there are some simple factors that should be considered to ensure that it does not occur without having first made suitable and sufficient attempts at preventing it. Putting to one side the HSE views on how to address this issue through their Management Standards, we should also look at four main elements of our work: the task (what is to be done), the team (who is required to achieve the task), the individual (their requirements) and the environment (in which the task, team and the individual operate). From reviewing these elements it should be possible to ascertain, with some reasonable degree of accuracy, the person profile that best matches the job specification. On how many occasions have we seen the promotion of a good performer from another department struggle with the greater responsibilities of a more challenging post? Was the promotion in this instance a reward or a burden for the person concerned, and has the company suffered twofold by losing a good manager in one department and gaining an under-performing one in another? Matching people to jobs, or indeed jobs to people, is an essential element of preventing work-induced stress. However, for some posts one cannot rely purely on professional qualification; the selection criteria must include all of the job requirements. Indeed, it is important to recognise that some people may have reached their peak of achievement, and that they are not capable of performing satisfactorily at the next rung of their current career ladder. Although this may be a discomforting truth to the individual, ignoring the fact and promoting them to a position that results in dysfunction within the team, under-performing output and stressed individuals, is a far worse burden to bear.

"Proactive and fully inclusive communication is also essential in eradicating stress-induced ill health."

There are many stress related issues that can be traced back to inadvertent omissions by line managers, rather than to any malicious reasons such as bullying or violence. It is estimated that one in five of us has experienced excessive stress at work within the last year, yet if

we had the time to delve deeper into the problem, we would have found in many cases that the root cause has simply been a case of inadequate communication. Crucially, for good communication to exist, not only must information be articulated correctly down the line to the coalface, but the feedback must be represented accurately back up the management tree. Even more critical is the need to foster an atmosphere of mutual respect where all parties feel free to communicate without fear of prejudice or threat.

The management of stress is not an easy function and there is no single specific solution that will suit all organisations, which is why the HSE's Management Standards have been produced in a generic format to be adapted for use in all companies. Certainly, much clearer definitions of the standards of output that are required from specified individuals will help, and implementing the Management Standards within every company will aid this objective. More importantly, however, is the establishment of robust communication channels and forums for sincere and honest discussion between managers and workers, that allow for adequate monitoring of the employees' health and well-being, and the enhancement of organisational effectiveness.

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The Management Standards define six common stress factors that fall into two categories:

Job Content stress factors
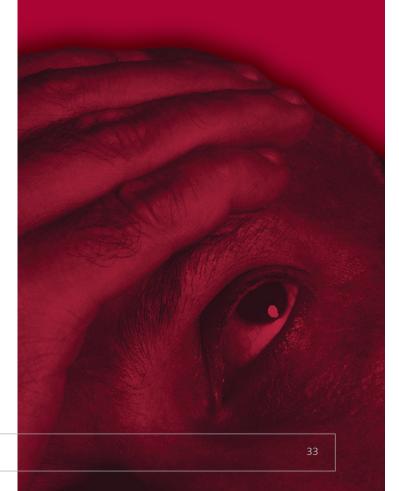- Demands, Control & Support.

Job Context stress factors
- Roles, Relationship & Change.

The Standards can be downloaded from the HSE website and can be adapted for each organisation's specific needs.

"Real Solutions, Real People"
- HSE Action Pack for HR departments & managers
INDG341 - Tackling Work Related Stress
- An Employee's Guide

All are available from HSE Books
Tel: 01787 881 165
or online via www.hsebooks.com

The HSE website stress area is at
www.hse.gov.uk/stress