

Stress: The most significant workplace health issue of the early 21st Century?



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In October 2003, the UK government's Health and Safety Executive (HSE) launched '*Real Solutions, Real People*' – a practical guide to help organisations with tackling work-related stress.

This is the most recent in a series of stress-related initiatives by the HSE, which also include the piloting of new draft management standards designed to assist with stress risk assessment and stress reduction; and the issuing of an Improvement Notice against a UK Health Authority, according to which the authority must take action to reduce the levels of stress amongst its workforce or face legal action.

Stress is one of seven priority programmes within the UK government's occupational health strategy 'Securing Health Together' – a ten year initiative introduced in 2000, among the aims of which are to reduce sickness absence costs and hence increase productivity.

Through these initiatives, the UK government is taking a lead in stress reduction which many other national governments are watching with interest. So how does the UK's position compare with that in other countries, and what lessons can be learnt by employers – both those outside the UK, and those with UK operations that need to ensure they are fully up-to-speed with legislation and industry best practice?

How big is the stress problem?

According to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2002), work-related stress is now the EU's second biggest occupational health problem after back pain - affecting nearly one-in-three employees in the EU and contributing to over half of all staff absenteeism. In total, over 40 million people a year in the EU, more than the entire population of Spain,

or the combined populations of Belgium, Holland and Portugal - claim to suffer from it. Unfortunately, far too many victims suffer in silence, and too many companies don't realise the extent to which stress can affect their business performance.

The human costs of stress are huge. According to recent research, around 20% of Europe's caseload of cardiovascular diseases - one of the biggest killers in the EU's 15 member states - is due to work-related stress. Musculoskeletal disorders and gastro-intestinal diseases, including irritable bowel syndrome, have also been linked to this problem, not to mention mental health disorders and even cancer.

Research in 1999 by Andrew Oswald, Professor of Economics at the University of Warwick, and David Blanchflower, Professor of Economics at Dartmouth College in the US (involving a study of 7,500 randomly sampled workers from 16 European countries), found that stress levels had risen sharply across Europe's workplaces in the previous five years, with half of the workers in the study reporting that stress and responsibility levels in their jobs had risen significantly over the period. Among the effects of this were that approximately half of Europe's workers were losing sleep as a result of worry, a fifth sometimes felt they were 'a worthless person', and a third admitted to losing confidence in themselves.

It isn't just employees who are suffering. Studies have found that work-related stress is costing businesses and governments in the EU an estimated €20 billion in absenteeism and related health costs. Add to this the costs of reduced productivity, increased staff turnover and a reduced ability to innovate – just three of the unwanted commercial side-effects of

work-related stress - and the real figure is probably significantly higher.

So why has stress become such a widespread problem at work?

What exactly is stress and what causes it?

Many people are confused about what stress is, and in particular the difference between pressure and stress:

- Pressure is the stimulation and challenge we need to achieve job satisfaction and self-esteem
- Stress is a reaction to continued excessive pressure or responsibility when we feel inadequate and unable to cope

The UK HSE, meanwhile, defines stress as 'the adverse reaction a person has to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them'.

Ever since prehistoric times, the 'stress response' has been a mechanism that our bodies have used to help us cope with danger. As soon as we're aware that something is threatening us, our brain sends messages to our nervous system to either get ready to stand and fight, or run away:

- Our heart rate and breathing go into overdrive, and we start to sweat
- Hormones including adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol - a hormone that helps our body adapt to stress – are pumped into our bloodstream
- Glucose and fatty acid levels are also increased to provide energy for our muscles to deal with the perceived threat
- All these reactions take place automatically and very quickly at the first signs of danger

This response, also known as 'fight or flight', has been vital to our survival. Unfortunately, whereas in Stone Age times we would usually have time to recover from the life or death encounters

that triggered the response, in the modern world we're confronted with a continuous stream of 'stressors' that our bodies perceive as threats, and react to accordingly.

Today, these threats could include financial pressures, fear of redundancy, overwork, deadline pressures or an important business presentation. The constant, ongoing pressure resulting from these stressors is different to the more immediate dangers that our stress response was designed to cope with. And it's at the point at which our bodies cannot recover from these pressures that we can begin to experience stress.

Put another way, while pressure can be beneficial, and spur us on to rise to new challenges, at a certain level it can disrupt our ability to cope, leading to mental and physical symptoms. There are a number of reasons why this can happen, but a growing number of researchers believe it's becoming such a major problem today because of the massive and rapid changes sweeping through society, and the uncertainty and threats this creates.

More specific causes range from monotony and lack of control, to increased time pressures and harassment. According to a major study, over 40% of employees in the EU complain they have to perform monotonous, repetitive tasks, while around a third of people say they have no control over the order of their work, how they work or when they work. In addition, 60% of employees claim they face tight deadlines at least a quarter of their time, and a similar proportion say they have to operate at high speed over this period.

So what can be done?

The big question, of course, is what can be done to alleviate work-related stress. And this isn't just a human and economic imperative, it's a legal requirement. Although there is no specific 'stress' legislation at an EU or national level, there are numerous directives and state laws that implicitly oblige employers to safeguard the mental and physical consequences of work-related stress.

In the UK, for example, under the provisions of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act (1974), employers have a general duty, so far as is reasonably practicable, to protect the health (including the mental health) of their employees at work. This includes taking steps to make sure that employees do not suffer stress-related illness as result of their work.

Similarly, under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1999), employers have a duty to:

- assess the risks to health and safety (reg. 3)
- apply the principles of prevention to protect health and safety (reg. 2 and schedule 11)
- ensure employees are capable of carrying out their tasks and provide health and safety training (reg. 13)
- take extra steps to protect young employees (reg. 19)

To help organisations with meeting these requirements, the UK HSE recommends a five-step approach to risk assessment:

1. Look for the hazards
2. Decide who might be harmed and how
3. Evaluate the risks and decide what needs to be done
4. Record the results of the assessment in an action plan
5. Review and revise the assessment and actions taken

This approach underpins the guidance and draft management standards which the HSE introduced earlier in 2003 with the aim of developing best practice in stress reduction. Although these new standards are for guidance, rather than an approved code of practice, they provide a clear indication of the probable direction of future legislation. The standards will be reviewed in the light of the findings of the pilot exercise which is now taking place, and after further consultation are due to be issued in Spring 2004.

The management standards approach was first proposed in June 2000, following a public consultation exercise. In May 2001, the HSE launched *'Tackling work-related stress – a manager's guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being'*. This publication sets out the risk assessment approach to tackling work-related stress and identifies common possible sources of stress, or stressors.

The HSE has identified six broad categories of risk factors for work-related stress. Organisations need to consider how much they are already doing to address these issues as it is unlikely they will have problems in all areas. A risk assessment should enable organisations to identify areas where they are not doing enough and where problems might arise. The six risk categories are:

1. Demands – the demands of the job

Does your organisation design jobs with realistic demands in mind?

Are demands matched to people's skills and abilities?

2. Control – how much control do employees have over how they work?

Do employees have a say about the way their work is undertaken?

Is the pace of work driven by a source beyond the employee's control (e.g. a machine)?

3. Support – from management and colleagues

Do employees know how to access managerial support and other resources within the organisation (such as Employee Assistance Programme provision)?

4. Relationships – with people at work

Are procedures in place to resolve workplace conflict?

Do employees feel able to report their concerns?

5. Role – how clear is their role?

Are conflicting demands placed on employees?

Is the organisation's induction procedure comprehensive enough?

6. Change - how much organisational change do employees need to deal with?

Does the organisation ensure that employees understand the reasons for changes?

Is employee consultation a part of the change? (Organisations are required by Law to do this.)

The draft management standards relate to these six main stressors. The HSE point out that, as with other health and safety hazards, work-related stress is best tackled by prevention rather than treatment, and that doing this means a change of business culture that is best achieved by means of a partnership between employers and employees.

Organisations will satisfy the first three standards (demands, control and support) if 85% of staff surveyed report that they are happy with their work in these areas. The remaining three standards are achieved if 65% of staff expresses satisfaction.

Understanding how different aspects of work can lead to stress should help with thinking about whether an organisation or team has a problem with stress.

The way forward

As noted at the beginning of this article, a new, practical guidance pack to enable employers and employees to develop solutions to workplace stress was launched by

the HSE on 30 October 2003. The guidance, called *'Real solutions, real people: tackling work-related stress'*, contains examples of clear, practical measures that provide a starting point for the workforce to agree how to tackle the findings of a stress risk assessment. The pack includes an introduction on how it should be used, learning points, prompt cards and an action plan to record and monitor what needs to be done.

Opening the conference to launch *'Real solutions, real people'*, UK Minister for Work, Des Brown, said, "Over half a million people in the UK are currently experiencing work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill. The Government is committed to working with business to tackle this problem, which currently costs our society about £3.7bn every year. The Government's approach is based on encouraging supportive organisational cultures where employers work with staff and their representatives to identify and address real employee concerns in a positive way. I am delighted that the HSE has developed this practical tool which encourages people to get on with the serious business of facing up to addressing this widespread issue. I would

encourage people to look at this as it does offer positive benefits for the individual, the business and Britain."

The fact that the UK government is treating stress so seriously reaffirms a number of points about this increasingly important management issue. Firstly, stress is not a new or 'made up' condition, and it will not go away unless its root causes are identified and tackled. As a result, work-related stress is a key workplace health issue.

Secondly, if stress is to be tackled effectively, commitment must come from the top and organisations must 'walk the talk.' The business case for dealing with stress has been identified, as have practical solutions to reduce it and hence maximise people's capability to work.

Employees must be healthy and safe, meaning that those operating in stressful environments must have their awareness raised about how such a situation can be improved. This also needs to include adequate support for people to return to work after a stress-related absence.

While there are no ready made answers, there are cost-effective solutions based on helping people to help themselves. Companies need to know what stress is and

where it is coming from. Employers also need to understand the difference between pressure which is stimulating and helps an employee to manage their job, and stress which can and lead to illness.

Those companies that have taken part in piloting the HSE's draft management standards have already benefited from the networking and support they have received by sharing ideas and experiences - and this has already made a significant difference to their workplaces.

It's perhaps not surprising, therefore, that there is growing international interest in what the UK is doing about stress in the workplace and the effective measures that can be taken to make sure that pressure of work does not become an experience detrimental to health. Because ultimately, 'good health is good business'.

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