Stress control: time for action

Carole Spiers reveals the shocking facts about stress in the workplace and provides some tips on how to tackle it

ACCORDING to latest figures from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), around half a million people in the UK experience work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill; up to 5million people in the UK feel 'very' or 'extremely' stressed by their work; and work-related stress costs society about £3.7billion every year.

Because of this, workplace stress is subject to increasing government legislation. Many employers don't realise that all organisations with five or more staff have a legal duty to conduct regular risk assessments of workplace hazards, including psychosocial hazards such as stress. These assessments should then be used to identify and reduce such hazards. A written health policy is also mandatory and should include a stress and bullying/harassment policy.

On 3 November 2004 the HSE published its new *Management Standards* for work-related stress — designed to help ensure that firms address stress 'risk factors' including demands, control, support, relationships, role and change.

While the Standards themselves don't impose a legal duty on organisations, breach of regulations could lead to criminal prosecution or claims for compensation through the civil court.

For each of the HSE's identified 'risk factors', the Standards include a description of what should be happening in an organisation in order for the ruling to be met. For example, demands stipulate that:

n The organisation provides employees with achievable goals within agreed hours of work
n Skills/abilities are matched to job demands
n Jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of employees
n Employees' concerns about their working environment are addressed.

The *Management Standards* are all about highlighting potential areas of stress and encouraging employers to take action to reduce them. If you think your organisation may be experiencing problems due to workplace stress, it will therefore need to take a proactive approach to tackling it.

Many organisations face deadline pressures or sudden changes in work demands, and employees need the necessary training and experience to meet the ever-increasing demands made on them. Examples 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.

Ultimately, reducing workplace stress is largely a matter of common sense and good management practice, and simply requires employers and employees to work 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.

For this to become a reality, organisations need to work towards the creation of a 'healthy' work culture: a culture where there is an intelligent, two-way dialogue between managers and employees — one where concerns can be raised in the confidence that actions will be taken and everyone in the organisation recognises stress as an unacceptable drain on creativity and resources.

Or, to put it another way, a culture where healthy ways of working have become so ingrained that the need for the *Management Standards* will no longer exist. ■

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AUTHOR Carole Spiers is senior occupational stress consultant at Carole Spiers Group **CONTACT** +44 20 8954 1593 www.carolespiersgroup.com ■ *For your FREE report:* HSE Management Standards on Stress — Made Simple*, e-mail: CCFoffer@carolespiersgroup.com*