

The term facilities manager already covers a multitude of roles and responsibilities. Following the HSE's announcement of its new management standards for work-related stress, this too can now be added to the list. Carole Spiers explains the importance of the new standards for FMs

LEGAL UPDATE

Stress busters

Many employers do not realise that since the publication of the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1999), all organisations with five or more employees have had a legal duty to conduct regular risk assessments of workplace hazards, including psychosocial hazards such as stress.

A written health policy is also mandatory for all firms with five or more employees. On 3 November, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) published its new management standards for work-related stress – designed to help ensure that organisations address key aspects of workplace stress (or ‘risk factors’) including demands, control, support, relationships, role and change. While the standards themselves do not impose a legal duty on organisations, breach of the applicable regulations could lead to criminal prosecution, or claims for compensation through the civil courts. So which aspects of work-related stress are the HSE most concerned about, and what can you do to tackle them?

For each risk factor, the standards include a description of what should be happening in your organisation, or ‘states to be achieved’. (For details visit www.hse.gov.uk/stress).

Demands include issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment. The organisation must provide employees with adequate and agreeable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work; people's skills and abilities should be correctly matched to their job demands; jobs should be designed within the capabilities of employees and concerns about their jobs should be addressed.

Control covers how much say the person has in the way they do their work. Where possible, employees should have control over their pace of work; they are encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work; and where possible, they are encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new and challenging pieces of work. The organisation should encourage employees to develop their skills. In addition, employees should have a say

over when breaks can be taken and they should be consulted over their work patterns.

Support includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues. The organisation should have policies and procedures to adequately support employees; systems should be in place to enable and encourage managers to support their staff and encourage employees to support their colleagues; employees should know what support is available and how to access it; they should know how to access the required resources to do their job and receive regular and constructive feedback.

Relationships includes: promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour to ensure fairness; employees sharing information relevant to their work; the organisation agreeing policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour; and systems being in place to enable managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour as well as encouraging employees to report unacceptable behaviour.

Role covers whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles. The organisation should ensure that, as far as possible, the different requirements it places on employees are compatible and it should provide information to enable employees to understand their role and responsibilities. It should ensure that, as far as possible, the requirements it places on employees are clear and systems should be in place to enable employees to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities.

Change covers how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation. Employees should be given timely information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed changes. It should ensure adequate employee consultation on changes and provide opportunities for

employees to influence proposals. Employees should be aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs and if necessary, they should be given training to support any changes in their jobs. They should be made aware of timetables for changes.

The management standards are about highlighting potential areas of stress, and encouraging employers to take action to reduce them. If you think your organisation may be experiencing problems owing to workplace stress, it will need to take a proactive approach to tackling it.

Many organisations face sudden changes in work demands. Employees need the necessary training to meet these demands. Examples include training in resilience, time management, communication skills and training to enable them to recognise the early warning signs of stress in themselves and others. Where employees have taken time away from work because of stress, their rehabilitation back to work needs to be carefully managed. And for those employees who require specialist support, employee assistance programmes and counselling services are a vital component in employee wellbeing. Training in communication skills (particularly active listening) is essential to help ensure that managers are aware of their team's problems.

Reducing workplace stress is largely a matter of common sense and good management practice, and simply requires employers and employees to work together. Both share a joint responsibility for reducing stress. When this is successful, it can help employees to enjoy their work more, and businesses to thrive as a result.

A free copy of Carole Spiers Group's special report *HSE management standards on stress - made simple* is available to all FM World readers. For further information, email: FMWorldoffer@carolespiersgroup.com

Carole Spiers is an international stress consultant at the Carole Spiers Group