• COVER FEATURE: STRESS MANAGEMENT

These days, more than ever, many people in the workplace will understand what it's like to experience stress. In extreme cases, work-related stress can result in ill health for years. So how do we manage the situation? **Carole Spiers** looks at some of the causes of stress and how we might prevent it occurring.

Organisational stress:

a management perspective

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British industry has known for many years that stress in the workplace costs employers millions of pounds every day and poses a serious health hazard for workers in all types of jobs. Step-by-step comprehensive guidance on tackling the causes of stress in the workplace – which is estimated to be costing employers £370 million a year – was published by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in June 2001.[1] The HSE states that 'stress-related illness is responsible for the loss of 6.5 million working days each year, costing the country as a whole £3.7 billion (and) an estimated half a million people in Britain are suffering from work-related stress, anxiety or depression at levels that make them ill'.[2]

Law suits brought by the employee are very often not now possible to defend successfully, as was proven on 5 July l999 when Birmingham City Council was ordered to pay £67,400 damages to Beverley Lancaster, a former draughtswoman who suffered a mental breakdown after being moved from her quiet technical job to a front-line position in housing, with no formal training.

This case was the first in the UK in which an employer actually *admitted liability* in court for causing personal injury due to stress. It has therefore become a marker for a future in which stress will have to be taken more seriously by employers. Employers could pay a high price for neglecting the issue – in future they could face criminal penalties.

This and other cases have caused high levels of interest and concern not only to employers and employees but also to the legal profession, insurance companies and the media. But this does not necessarily open the floodgates to all employees to sue their employers because they feel under stress. It does mean, however, that organisations have the responsibility to demonstrate a 'duty of care' to their workforce, and to ensure that safe systems of work and good practice are in place. Previously, companies often only paid lip service to this need.

In February 2002, a UK Court of Appeal ruled that signs of stress in a worker must be obvious to a manager before the company can be taken to court for negligence. On the basis of this ruling, three workers who won almost £200,000 between them for job-related stress lost their money on appeal in a landmark decision. This demonstrates that stress management is the joint responsibility of both the employer and employee, and every employee is jointly accountable for his or her own health and safety.[3]

Because stress is recognised as being multi-factoral, it is often difficult for the medical profession to readily diagnose and treat the condition, and such definitions that do exist tend to be subjective. The HSE, for example, defines it as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure. It isn't a disease. But if stress is intense and goes on for some time, it can lead to mental and physical ill health (for example, depression, nervous breakdown, heart disease).[4]

Employers are better advised to look at the underlying problems rather than seeking helpful diagnoses. If employers are aware that certain stressors may exist in the workplace but take specific action to minimise them, they can then demonstrate to the Courts that they have taken all such steps reasonable in the circumstances.

Illustration by Mike Edwards

SOME SOURCES OF STRESS

Challenge is an essential part of every job if maximum performance is to be achieved from staff at all levels. However, it is important to remember that individuals have finite mental and physical resources, and cannot always deal appropriately with the challenges they face. Employees do, from time to time, need support! The 'stress carrier' employer who believes that achieving higher and higher levels of profit requires more and more pressure being placed on staff, with little or no support, seems unaware that people, just like machines, can malfunction – and do, on occasion, break down.

Flatter management structures, together with the impact of organisational change as employers seek to reduce costs and maximise profit, have led to an environment that is less secure and more pressured. Advances in technology mean that a personal office and desk are no longer considered essential for management to function.

There are numerous factors to consider when determining the presence of stress in the workplace, the most common being listed below.

Excessive working hours/unrealistic deadlines/inordinate workload

Long working hours required by many employers can take a toll on an employee's health. Most individuals can work at an excessive pace for a short period of time but in the event that an employer expects this to be

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continuous, it can lead to devastating results – for example, burnout of the employee, which can possibly lead to early retirement or hospitalisation and the necessity for the organisation to find a replacement at short notice.

Work 'underload'

Job 'underload' associated with repetitive routine, boring and under stimulating work has also been associated with ill health. Particular groups of workers such as pilots, air traffic controllers and nuclear power workers face a special aspect of work 'underload'. They must deal with long periods of time in which they have little to do, but facing the possibility that they may suddenly be required to spring into action in a crisis.

Impact of new technology

Employees can be faced with sudden change, often without receiving the necessary technological support and training from their employing organisations. They are expected to become their own administration centres, with the computer network server being the controller. Long gone are the days when an employee experienced day-to-day interaction with colleagues – and this form of communication is fast becoming obsolete. For instance, e-mail is rapidly replacing post. It may offer greater efficiency but the human factor may have disappeared and with it often the employee's sense of well-being. Inevitably, this can have a profound negative effect on job performance. ➤

Fear
Members of the workforce might be too frightened to admit they are experiencing stress-related problems in case they are viewed by their employers as weak and unable to cope – and, therefore, possible candidates for the next round of redundancies.

Uncertainty and change
Although both are part of industrial life in the 21st century, many managers find their organisation's handling of such matters to be unrealistic and unacceptable. Redundancy can have devastating and far-reaching effects on all personnel, both for those staying and those leaving the organisation.

Short-term contracts
Common in today's business world, employees in the public, private and corporate sectors have to accept that they may have to tender for their own jobs and deal with the outside competition. For many, this represents a completely new role – one that can cause high levels of uncertainty and financial worry. No longer is there such a thing as a 'job for life'.

Changing role
Employers now expect employees to do 'more for less' in terms of people, finance and equipment, and have unrealistic expectations of their employees. When given additional responsibilities, they are not

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necessarily given the appropriate support and training. Many employees feel that they are no longer treated as people, and they lack both autonomy and clear direction from the management.

Changing culture
Paternalistic organisations died some time ago, and there is now a growing gulf between what people want from their jobs and what they get. The 'presenteeism' factor is alive and well – particularly in organisations where there are threats of redundancy. Many employees feel the need to be seen in the workplace at all times if they are to justify their existence (whether or not they are actually being productive).

Working at home/hot desking/hotelling
Employees complain that they are unsure of the actual output required of them and they experience high levels of negative stress, worrying they have not achieved enough productivity. Their manager contacts them too infrequently, they experience little or no peer group support and their only communication with the outside world is often by e-mail, fax or telephone.

Some organisations follow the practice where desks are provided on a 'first come, first served' basis, where staff have no space of their own – no territory that is theirs. Desks have to be cleared at the end of each working session, and employees find this is impractical and harmful to their overall work production levels. With no personal space they often feel no sense of identity or self-worth.

Crisis and trauma
Employees in fields such as the emergency services are

at special risk from the effects of trauma and post-trauma stress. Their employers should acknowledge the emotional support they need and act in a tangible way. But the effects of a crisis can happen in any organisation: an accident at work, an accident at home, the death of a family member or a suicide in the workplace. These sensitive situations need to be dealt with and not become taboo subjects that will take the organisation a long while from which to recover.

Bullying at work
A report published by the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST) in 2001 found that one in four people had been bullied within the last five years and that bullying may contribute to the loss of as many as 18.9 million working days annually.[5] Clearly it is bad for business and affects teamwork, enthusiasm and morale.

RISK ASSESSMENT
Stress can result in mental injury. In the same way as physical injury, this risk can be assessed and preventative action can be taken. Increasingly, prudent employers are introducing policies to identify and manage stress.

Action to mitigate stress often means nothing more than good management. Companies need to ask themselves the following questions.

- Are there appropriate support and training initiatives addressing the issue of stress?
- Are staff informed and involved in the business, and their tasks and responsibilities clearly defined?
- Are effective systems in place for dealing with interpersonal conflict such as bullying or harassment?

Employers need to protect themselves from litigation and create a more positive and productive working environment. They can do this in the following ways.

- First, by identifying the potential harm by assessing the nature of the work, the workload and working hours.
- Second, by reviewing any indicators of stress such as absenteeism or general sickness.
- Third, by considering who is particularly vulnerable and ensuring that issues of time off for stress or stress-related illness are addressed.

PREVENTATIVE MEASURES AND POSITIVE ACTION
Bearing in mind the legal implications of stress and employer responsibility, companies should set up appropriate procedures and structures. Employers need to take preventative measures to support their employees and take appropriate action to mitigate stress-induced illness that may lead to litigation.

Many companies are implementing policies outlining the company structure and reporting protocols. However, it is important to bear in mind that stress policies are not only for the protection of the employee, they are also there to protect the employer. They must be constructive if they are to be effective and their introduction should be accompanied by management training on the implementation of the policy.

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1. Rationalise the stress management function
- Review the developing needs of an organisation and its workforce.
- Provide a business case for the provision of stress management support.
- Produce a stress policy.
- Launch the policy by raising employees' awareness as to the cause and effect of stress both at home and at work.
- Train managers and supervisors on the implementation and management of the stress policy.

2. Workplace employee counselling support
More and more managers are faced with having to assist members of their staff with personal problems relating to their home lives. Knowing how to approach an individual can be highly constructive and can produce an effective response. It is important that managers are trained to recognise signs and symptoms

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of stress in their workforce. The earlier these signs are recognised, the quicker any problems can be solved and the possible impact on employees lessened.

Counselling is now commonly used in organisations to help lower absenteeism levels, but in order for this to be effective it must address workplace as well as personal issues. Organisations that have instituted formal counselling services have reaped the benefits of higher motivation and morale, better stress management and less likelihood of legal claims for negligence.

In February 2002, the UK Court of Appeal judgement stated that employers should 'only have to take action if there are plain signs of impending harm to health from job stress'. In addition, the judgement said that any employer who offered a confidential counselling service was unlikely to be found in breach of duty by the courts.[6]

3. First contact support teams
Selecting volunteers to be trained in workplace counselling skills to diffuse employees' stress-related issues is helpful in terms of removing what can be a personal and emotive issue from the management scenario to the counselling mode, providing boundaries of confidentiality within which employee and employer can resolve personal and professional issues.

4. Managing absenteeism
In any industrial setting, employees are cared for when they are at work, but when they are sick they tend to be neglected. Monitoring absence, establishing the reason for absence by way of return-to-work interviews, and, where possible, offering rehabilitation support are all important roles for management.

The Industrial Society stated in July 2001 that 'flexible working patterns help to reduce absenteeism'. New research commissioned by the Industrial Society suggests that absence rates among employees in 300 firms fell from around 8 days per employee per year to 6.5 days per employee per year over the last 18 months.[7]

5. Stress mediation
Where stress emanates from within the workplace and is as a result of a clash of management cultures or a particular management style, providing neutral arbitration may well defuse stressful situations and avoid litigation.

THINKING BEYOND STRESS MANAGEMENT
Stress is the responsibility of both employer and employee alike. It is therefore important that both parties are aware of what the term 'stress' really means and, more importantly, what action they can *jointly* take to reduce its possible negative effects.

There is a financial argument for putting stress management systems in place. If stress is detected, its cause should be diagnosed and the underlying problem addressed. A systematic assessment of the sources of stress and planning to mitigate these can help to achieve a reduction in employee stress. The lack of concern shown by companies for employee welfare and development is a significant factor, which can result in decreased profitability and productivity of companies.

In order to ensure that stress management becomes part of corporate culture and company philosophy – as part of a preventative measure – serious consideration needs to be given to careful planning and preparation of training to raise awareness and identify stress.

No one is exempt from stress and, therefore, any training should be extended to all employees, from senior management to the shop floor. Training should be cascaded throughout the organisation so that the workforce can see that a commitment is being made from the top. Strategies will not succeed if they are regarded as peripheral activities – they need to be visibly supported by senior management. In so doing, a firm foundation is laid within the company structure. Creating a working team with everyone working together for the overall benefit of the organisation is essential and will enable employees to share concerns, develop strategies and move forward. Where this does not happen, the organisation will become fragmented and members of the workforce disparate in their aims and objectives.

The future will be bleak if old-fashioned values such as support, standards and principles are not taken seriously. If these tenets are not upheld, businesses will find their workforces comprised of disillusioned, distrusting people who believe that their organisations are disingenuous and will in time respond accordingly. ◼

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