

Feature: Workplace stress

The impact on your bottom line is just the start

Carole Spiers, business stress consultant at the Carole Spiers Group, an international stress management and employee wellbeing consultancy, explains why companies should not ignore the impact of workplace stress.

According to latest figures from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), work-related stress accounts for 90 million lost working days per year, costing businesses £3.7 billion. As well as acting as an unnecessary drain on the economy, workplace stress is also the subject of increasing government legislation.

- Many employers do not realise that since the publication of the Management of Health & 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. These assessments should then be used to identify and either avoid or reduce such hazards.
- A written health policy is also mandatory for all firms with five or more employees, and this should include a stress and bullying & harassment policy.
- In November, the HSE is due to publish its new Management Standards for work-related stress. These are designed to help ensure that organisations address key aspects of workplace stress (demands, control, support, relationships, role and change) or face prosecution if they fail to do so.
- Breach of the applicable regulations could lead to criminal prosecution, or claims for compensation through the civil courts.

What causes workplace stress?

The causes of workplace stress are many and varied, and the following are some of the most important potential sources. None are insurmountable, and one of the keys to effective stress management is being aware of where these 'stressors' may occur, and ready to address them before they become real problems.

- Inadequate or poor communication is one of the most common organisational stressors.
- Home and work-based stresses can feed off and reinforce each other.
- The work demands made on an individual need to match their ability, and the amount of control over working practices available to them.
- Both work overload and 'underload' can lead to stress.
- Shift work and night work can be inherently stressful, and may lead to an increased risk of accidents.
- Home workers may feel isolated and require structured support.
- 'Hot desking' and short-term contracts bring their own particular pressures.
- Role conflict, ambiguity and changing roles all contribute greatly to stress.
- Management style needs to achieve a balance between consultation, support and control.
- Managers often need more training in communication and people skills.

- Dealing with redundancy brings its own particular specialist training requirements.
- Careful attention needs to be paid to the planning of physical workspace in order to ensure staff are comfortable and motivated.
- The introduction of new technology, if not approached in a planned and gradual manner, can add to stress levels.
- Organisations can mistakenly encourage a culture of 'presenteeism', in which employees feel the need to be seen to be working at all times.
- A correct work-life balance is essential to good health and efficient performance.

Workplace stress isn't something that if left alone will go away of its own accord. It can only be tackled through a process of consultation, identification, intervention and management, and not through short-term initiatives or one-off 'quick fixes'.

The effects of stress

Stress is an extremely complex phenomenon that can affect individuals in many different ways and to differing degrees, and can therefore severely affect an organisation's performance.

- The most detrimental effects of stress include high levels of absenteeism, poor job performance, low morale, low commitment, increased accidents, difficult industrial relations, poor relationships with customers and possible litigation.
- The link between absence and stress is so well proven that non-attendance statistics are often used as an indicator of stress 'hot spots'.
- Individuals suffering from high levels of stress may find their powers of creativity and rational thought become weakened.
- Where an individual is unable to perform their job to the required standard, this will eventually produce its own stress response.
- Many stress-related problems can be exacerbated as a direct consequence of management not having the required expertise to deal with them.
- Employee morale is vitally important. Low morale and lack of recognition by the employer will often lead to the loss of valuable trained personnel.
- Where relationship boundaries are not clearly defined, this can lead to misunderstandings that cause undue pressure.
- Conflict can be endemic within the workplace, and if not addressed will damage both the organisation and the individuals involved.
- In its most extreme form, workplace stress can result in bullying, violence or even suicide, either within or outside the workplace.

So what can you do?

If you think your organisation may be experiencing problems due to workplace stress, you need to take a proactive approach to 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 in themselves and others.

- Where employees have been forced to take time away from work as a result of stress, their rehabilitation back to work needs to be carefully managed.
- For those employees who require specialist support, Employee Assistance Programmes and counselling services are a vital component in employee well being.
- Training in communication (and particularly active listening) skills is essential to help ensure that managers are aware of their team members' problems and in a position to offer early interventions to resolve these.

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 more information please contact the Carole Spiers Group on 020 8954 1593 or go to www.carolespiersgroup.com

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