

Stressed Nation

Following National Stress Awareness Day, HSE Focus examines stress in the workplace



'Even clients who have serious problems with absenteeism due to stress are often reluctant to tackle it. It is not tangible like other health and safety hazards.'

Work-related stress is the biggest cause of absenteeism in UK workplaces, costing businesses an estimated 12.8 million working days in 2004/5 and presenting serious emotional and physical health risks to employees. Yet when it comes to tackling the problem, bosses are often reluctant to act, citing the problem as too nebulous, sensitive or trivial.

According to HSE statistics, work-related stress affects around 20% of Britain's workforce. Symptoms range from insomnia, panic attacks and loss of appetite to physical manifestations such as muscular aching and digestive problems. Long-term sufferers of stress are at increased risk of developing conditions such as coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, immune system deficiencies and mental ill-health.

In some cases, a stressful workplace environment can make under-pressure employees resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms. A recent survey conducted by Vitabiotics Wellmann at Lancaster University noted that a third of the 2,200 men surveyed hit the bottle to help them 'unwind' from a day at the office.

So, what should employers be doing to reduce stress in the workplace before it gets this far?

One source of free, practical advice is the HSE Stress Priority Programme, which has been developed over the last two years in partnership with 100 employers in the health, education, government and financial sectors that have been shown by HSE research to have the highest employee stress levels.

"Our strategy works on the premise that anyone can be susceptible to work related stress," says Chris Rowe, who spearheads the programme.

"It offers a generic approach that enables organisations to put in place interventions to prevent excessive pressure on staff."

The importance of developing a culture of stress prevention in workplaces was typified by a recent high-profile case where an employee of a major bank walked away with damages of £817,000 after judges found that her employer had been ineffectual in dealing with the stresses she had suffered as a result of office bullying. The court heard that bullying by colleagues had made her suffer two nervous breakdowns and led to her admittance to hospital amid fears that she may attempt suicide.

Despite the bank's attempts to rehabilitate the plaintiff, the judges decided that not enough had not done enough to address the cause of her stress problems, and condemned the way in which managers had "collectively closed their eyes to what was going on, in the hope that the problem would go away".

The Stress Priority Programme aims to help employers avoid this kind of situation with proactive 'management standards' designed to adapt to the individual cultures of businesses and by making workplaces less stressful environments.

"The ideal low-stress working environment is one in which the organisation is well-led, with a clear vision, good communication and an effective feedback loop," explains Rowe.

"Employees need to feel valued, and job descriptions are key – the most important thing is that employers are producing high quality jobs. People need to be honestly able to say 'Yes, I have a good job.'"

One employer that has strived to elicit just that response is Wokingham District Council, which developed a pioneering stress management campaign for its 2,200 employees back in 2003. The council's interest in dealing with stress was piqued after attending a meeting with health and safety consultants RSK ENSR where the consequences of sweeping the issue under the carpet was discussed. Soon afterwards, Wokingham District Council sought partial funding from the DTI to draw up an ambitious pre-emptive stress awareness, management and mitigation scheme.

"One of the things that it did, almost immediately, was to dramatically recast stress as an open subject for discussion instead of viewing it as a form of weakness," recalls Steve Richardson, the council's environmental health officer.

"If you can deal with stress issues, you have a happier workforce that will stay with you. You won't have the recruitment costs and your work absences fall – it is a win in every direction".

Richardson proceeds to run through an impressive list of improvements that have resulted from the programme, including halving staff turnover to 7.3%, reducing the number of days lost to illness by 119 and reducing days lost through occupational health issues from 65 to 39. Richardson also points out that there has been a considerable increase in positive responses to the question "is the council a good employer?" on the annual staff satisfaction survey.

Wokingham District Council may be a shining example of best practice, but there remains widespread evidence suggesting that not everybody is following suit.

Philippa Miles, a senior consultant at RSK ENSR Health & Safety Ltd, believes that one explanation for this is the relative difficulty of quantifying the effects of stress.

“Even clients who have serious problems with absenteeism due to stress are often reluctant to tackle it. It is not tangible like other health and safety hazards, and it is often hard to determine whether stress is work related or caused by something outside of work. In smaller companies, constraints on time and resources can make it difficult to undertake the necessary research to find a solution.”

The detrimental impact of stress is so ingrained and widespread in the British workplace that RSK ENSR Health & Safety Ltd felt compelled to make it a central tenet of their newly launched Health and Well-being division. Though it also offers services such as noise assessment and audiometric testing, a substantial amount of the team's initial business has come from managing employee ill-health, carrying out employee coaching and counselling, undertaking health surveillance and screenings, and conducting stress audits and awareness training.

“The compensation rates related to occupational health are higher than any safety-related claim, so it's no surprise that we've been getting so many enquiries lately,” notes Mark Durrington, who fronts RSK ENSR's Health and Well-being team in the north west of England.

Despite a legal obligation for employers to protect the health and safety of its staff, there is currently no legislation obliging organisations to minimise work-related stress. As long as this is the case, HSE guidelines and consultants' advice can only provide a good springboard for employers intent on having a healthy and productive workforce. Where bosses are less vigilant, there is often a lack of legal enforcement to reinforce the message.

“A lot of employers are not completing risk assessments, and are getting away with it,” warns Durrington.

“The current level of enforcement by HSE is not sending out a clear message that this issue is important. To give employers an incentive to bring about any significant change, we need to see stronger enforcement.”
