



AN INTRODUCTION FOR MANAGERS



WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is the natural reaction people have to excessive pressures or demands. If it is prolonged or intense it can lead to mental and physical ill health, such as depression, back pain, nervous breakdown and heart disease. Work-related stress can affect anyone in any sector and in any size of organisation. Being under pressure can improve performance and give satisfaction when challenging objectives are achieved. But when demand and pressure are too much they lead to stress.

WHY SHOULD YOU MANAGE THESE RISKS?

The HSE has given three reasons why an employer should tackle stress. They are:

1. Ethical

Employers do not generally wish to make their employees ill, and would even seek to prevent it as far as possible. Work-related stress can make employees ill, so the ethical approach is to do everything possible to prevent stress.

2. Legal

All companies have a legal obligation under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to make a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks to the health and safety that their employees may be exposed to whilst at work.

“It is the duty of all employers to make sure that their employees are not made ill by their work. Where stress caused or made worse by work could lead to ill health, employers must assess the risk. If necessary, [they] must then take reasonable steps to deal with those pressures.”

Tackling work-related stress: ‘A manager’s guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being’, HSG218 - HSE Guidance Notes (updated November 2001)

The Regulations require all employers to assess the risks to their own workers, and any others who may be affected by their work or business. This will enable them to identify the steps they need to take to comply with health and safety law. Companies with five or more employees should also record the significant findings of that risk assessment.

An increasing number of employees have taken their employers to court for stress-related illnesses caused or made worse by their work, and have received large amounts of compensation from the courts. This has happened so frequently that insurance companies very often seek to settle claims out of court.

3. Economic

The HSE, the CBI and others have produced figures that state that stress-related sickness absence is costing organisations between £350 and £500 per annum per employee. This is sufficient reason, in itself, to deal with the issue of work-related stress. There are also many other

hidden costs associated with employees who are suffering from stress, such as: lack of commitment, high staff turnover, low morale, costly mistakes, and poor customer service. Stress is a major concern and challenge not only because of the effects on the health of the individual workers, but also because of the costs or economic impact on business. The total costs to business cannot be quantified.

WHAT CAUSES STRESS AT WORK?

The following is a list of some of the factors that may cause of stress at work.

- Poor communication and inappropriate management style
- Lack of control
- Change and lack of job security
- Unrealistic deadlines
- Unreasonable workload, unsociable hours, inflexible working arrangements
- Lack of training, resources and opportunities to develop
- Unclear roles
- Interpersonal conflict
- Lack of feedback on performance and feeling undervalued
- Uncomfortable or unsafe working environment
- Bullying
- Harassment
- Nature of the job, such as working with the public, working alone, repetitive or boring work

HOW TO TACKLE STRESS

A proactive stance in Stress Management Strategy consists of:

- **Primary Intervention**
Identifying causes of stress and levels of risk to individuals and organisation using risk assessment.
- **Secondary Intervention**
Implementing the recommendations identified in the risk assessment- provision of appropriate stress awareness. Training for all staff and implementation of Stress Management Policy.
- **Tertiary Intervention**
Dealing with treatment and rehabilitation of staff suffering from stress related illness using support schemes.

In general employers have taken a **reactive** approach to stress management but this is not necessarily the best way forward as it can be costly, ineffective and risky. By taking a **proactive** stance the following benefits can result:

- improvement in staff motivation and morale
- decrease in cost of replacing staff
- decrease in sickness/absence
- increase in organisational productivity
- reduction in the likelihood of claims for Personal Injury because of breach of duty of care

Work-related stress is preventable and action to reduce it can be very cost-effective. The first step for employers is to assess the risks of work-related stress by looking for pressures at work that could cause high and long lasting levels of stress and deciding who might be harmed. Once the risks have been identified you can then take adequate action to prevent the harm.