

Stress measures

Understanding the impact stress has on individuals and organisations is the first step in addressing the problem. Iain McCormick and Stewart Forsyth look at methods of measuring and managing stress.

There has been a recent outcry from employer representatives at planned health and safety changes making stress a workplace hazard. Concerns are that the amendments will increase business liabilities and that the idea of stress as a workplace hazard is fraught with difficulty.

Measurable imbalance

The assessment of workplace stress need not be a difficult or complex issue. To see how it can be measured it is important to understand that stress is the imbalance between:

- The demands of the workplace;
- The capacity of the individual.

When the imbalance is small most people see it as an enjoyable challenge. As the imbalance grows people find it distressing.

Stress is not the usual fluctuations in well being that are part of everyday life. Stress exists when the imbalance affects individuals' emotional or physical state to the point where it disrupts their work and personal life.

Business and personal

As the diagram shows, distress can exist on a workplace or individual level. Increasing distress leads to lower levels of job satisfaction, employee well being and organisational performance. Each element in the diagram can be systematically measured.

Workplace distress

Workplace distress can be measured by such organisational statistics as:

- Staff turnover;

- Absentee rates;
- Sick days;
- Stoppages and other forms of industrial action;
- Wastage rates.

Individual distress

Individual distress can be measured by a simple survey of:

- Sleep disturbance;
- Anxiety;
- Depression;
- Anger and frustration;
- Increased time urgency;
- Under-achievement;
- Difficulty concentrating.

Job satisfaction

As workplace and individual distress levels climb, job satisfaction falls. Recent research shows that people judge job satisfaction by weighing up their good and bad experiences. Job satisfaction can again be measured in employee opinion surveys, which typically measure satisfaction with:

- Pay, benefits and other rewards;
- Personal growth and promotion;
- Empowerment;
- Supervision;
- Operating procedures;
- Co-workers and team spirit;
- The nature of the work;
- Communication.

As job satisfaction falls so does employee well being. Staff become demotivated as extrinsic rewards (such as pay), intrinsic rewards (such as interest in the work) and social rewards (enjoying the fellowship at work) lose their appeal.



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Affecting performance

As employee well being falls so does organisational performance. Organisational performance can be measured by such statistics as:

- Production per employee;
- Revenue per employee;
- Profit per employee;
- Ratio of profit to staff costs.

There is now sufficient evidence to suggest that employee distress can significantly affect organisational per-

formance. For this reason the measurement and alleviation of workplace stress can be very helpful as a tactic to improve performance.

Detecting causes

With recent advances in computing power and statistical analysis, organisations can now understand much more about the impact of stress. Such techniques make it possible to identify the causes of stress in an organisation. This



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Matching staff to jobs through sound structured recruitment interviews and the use of psychological tests can mean the people employed have the right knowledge, skills and attitudes to work calmly and productively.



Adapted from Hart, PM and Cooper CL 'Occupational stress: Towards an integrated framework' in N Anderson, DS Ones, HK Singangil & C Viswesvaran (eds), *Handbook of Industrial, Work and Organizational Psychology: Personnel Psychology* 2001, New Bury, CA:Sage.

enables understanding of the relationships between the types of variables outlined in this article:

- Workplace distress;
- Individual distress;
- Job satisfaction;
- Employee well being;
- Organisational performance.

What can be done?

Once the causes of stress have been identified they can be dealt with in a systematic fashion. There is no single approach that can be adopted to prevent stress occurring at work, however a combination of the following can be very beneficial.

Research suggests that short term improvements may not be maintained, so regular, typically annual, surveys are recommended.

ORGANISATION

Matching

Matching staff to jobs through sound structured recruitment interviews and the use of psychological tests can mean the people employed have the right knowledge, skills and attitudes to work calmly and productively.

Training

Team training and coaching can reinforce positive management attitudes towards staff such as openness and a sincere regard for all employees. Man-

agers can be trained to acknowledge that work is very stressful from time to time and to be especially considerate to staff at these times.

Design

Work and job design can create jobs that have clear targets and work plans and tasks that are effective and productive.

Change management

Successful change management and a commitment to continuous improvement can mean that any reorganisations produce minimum disruption and that problems are evaluated in terms of work process failures and not an individual worker's fault.

INDIVIDUAL ASSISTANCE

Induction

Careful induction can be extremely helpful in establishing the right expectations for new staff. Clearly spelling out health and safety procedures, productivity expectations and job accountabilities can all help to ensure that staff attitudes are aligned with the organisation's needs. This will reduce stress for all concerned in the long term.

Upskilling

Skills training can insure that staff have the right abilities to undertake productive work.

Process

Process improvement procedures typically involve staff in the identification and solution of work problems. Staff who participate in these projects typically feel a strong sense of involvement and control which helps to alleviate stress.

Stress management

Stress management that teaches management and staff about the nature and effects of stress as well as how to minimise its impacts can be extremely helpful in reducing workplace stress levels.

Coaching

Coaching for individuals or teams can provide objective feedback on performance levels and constructive advice on dealing effectively with work challenges.

Communication

Communication is a constant challenge for most organisations but regular staff briefings on company direction and performance can greatly help staff to feel in touch with developments.

Team building

Team building – either formal outdoor experiential training, team problem solving or just plain fun together – can

create a sense of belonging and involvement for staff that will greatly counter the adverse effects of stress.

Healthcare

Healthcare services can provide regular medical check ups to ensure staff are not suffering from insidious stress symptoms. Psychologists, dieticians and fitness instructors can address the mental and physical sides of stress prevention.

Conclusive surveys

In conclusion, stress is something that can easily be assessed using periodic confidential staff surveys. The results of surveys can be used to understand the causes of stress in the workplace. Once the causes of stress can be understood, steps can be taken to reduce distress and increase organisation performance and profitability.

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