

Stress in the workplace

Minimise work stress and fatigue to maximise the safety of employees – and reduce the chances of expensive stress claims.

by Stewart Forsyth

The previous Health and Safety Act included the adverse impact of work stress and fatigue in its cover and there have been some significant cases and seriously expensive awards over recent years. Now there are new changes to the Act and it's up to you to take necessary precautions.

It is possible that little will change. Dramatic examples of employers failing to provide a safe environment for staff could continue to be the cases that attract the court's attention and sanction. Or the changes in the amendments to the Act, such as the extension of who can bring a prosecution, could lead to an increase in cases of work stress and fatigue before the courts. For example, there is the risk that the current high numbers of middle-aged males who have difficulty with depression or back pain will re-frame the cause of their difficulties in stress terms.

In Australia, since the Commonwealth introduced stress claims, the number has been increasing at 20% per year. These are expensive for employers – some involved have estimated at least A\$100,000 per claim.

Even if your staff don't bring claims against you, they could take significant time off to cope with stress-related problems. What policies do you have to manage such time off? Are your employee's sick leave costs covered by insurance? (You can't insure against prosecution, but

nothing stops you insuring against other costs.)

There is another good reason for taking anti-stress action. There is good international research showing that pulling back work stress lifts performance of individuals and of their organisations. So, by working out how to reduce the risks of work stress, employers could be gaining double benefits:

- Reducing the risk of prosecution, financial penalty and loss of reputation, *and*
- Improving the loyalty and performance of staff.

WHAT IS OCCUPATIONAL STRESS?

Remember that stress is not defined in the legislation. The definitions of stress and fatigue provided by Dr Tony Taylor of Victoria University are:

- Occupational stress is the substantial imbalance between demands made on individuals in the course of their employment and their ability to respond with the support available; *and*
- Occupational fatigue is the substantial inability of individuals to recover their normal level of functioning at work primarily because of the continuing weight of demands made on them in the course of their employment.

Some notes about these definitions: ►



- They are close to those that OSH uses, but a little clearer;
- Stress is not just imbalance, but also inability to cope;
- Occupational means that the primary causes of stress or fatigue must be related to the workplace; *and*
- Substantial means that we are not talking about trivial disturbance.

It is important to note that stress or fatigue may be demonstrated in different ways:

- What people say – how they describe their thoughts of not coping or their feelings of distress;
- What people do – tremble, look fearful, slow down their responses.
- Team or organisational level – low morale, absenteeism, high levels of staff turnover

HOW DOES YOUR BUSINESS STACK UP IN THIS HIGH STAKES GAME?

This simple Stress Review guide helps to highlight where your organisation's stress hot spots might be.

1. Rate your supervisors

It would be rare for a supervisor to intend to stress or burn people but it's worth checking the following:

- Doesn't clarify the details of work expectations or the reason why the work needs to be done this way;
- Treats people as objects rather than individuals - they are there as productive units, not as individuals;
- Better at talking or giving orders than listening;
- Punishes and blames for non-performance (including public humiliation), less likely to reward for doing it right;
- Works to create factions and reduce trust, limits communication and mutual support among team-members;
- Sticks to the tried and true, rejects suggestions for improvement;
- Inconsistent in their own behaviour, doesn't demonstrate the businesses values, doesn't follow up on commitments to staff; *and*
- Not all that good technically, not able to give the best example of how to do the job.

Common issues that less-than-competent supervisors face:

- Not seeing the people forest for the task trees. There is so much to do that most of the supervisor's time can go to instructing, trouble-shooting, re-working and complaining about the poor quality of people;
- Avoidance of important personal issues. Wanting to believe that people are much easier to deal with if you can avoid the messy emotional aspects of their lives, some supervisors ignore the signs that their person is not coping; *and*
- No time to talk. Having absorbed the lessons of the time management 'experts', that staff who want to chat are 'time bandits', some supervisors strive for efficient communication. They rely on e-mail or instructions – mainly one-way communication – and so cut themselves off from the chance to learn where their people are at,



and what the issues are.

2. Rate the actual work

- Physical hazards, including noise, heat, cold;
- Psychological hazards, including trauma and pressure;
- Inadequate or unsafe equipment;
- Pressure to complete long hours, rotating shifts;
- Too much to do in the time available;
- Expectation of working through breaks or lunch, taking work home or working weekends;
- Pressure to achieve unrealistic targets;
- Lack of access to important information;
- Little latitude for control or autonomy; *and*
- Adverse impact on leisure time or family commitments.

This is quite a long list that emphasises the factors that drive stress. Of course, they don't all have the same effect on everyone. What for some is a buzzy, vibrant work environment could be overwhelmingly unpleasant for someone else. There is evidence that some people work better under time-pressure than others. The standard approach to hazard assessment is appropriate here – working with those who know the work environment and can identify existing and potential risk areas. Have those same people make suggestions for managing those risks.

3. Rate the organisation

- Infrequent or no communication about direction and results;
- No consultation about changes affecting people;
- Risk of job loss or down-sizing;
- Doesn't track holidays taken (or not), absenteeism, including sickness-related;

Even though some organisational issues might seem remote from most employees work environments' they can have significant impact. Lack of processes to involve and communicate with staff are typical weaknesses in organisations with more than just a few employees. These communication gaps contribute to stress, directly by contributing to powerlessness and anxiety, and indirectly by not providing the communication link to check the facts.

4. Rate team morale and job satisfaction

- The team is negative and unsupportive; *and*
- The person is unhappy in their work.

This might seem like a no-brainer, but measuring and managing job satisfaction can be one of your best insurance measures against work stress risks. You can buffer the effects of work stress by building up job satisfaction.

5. Rate opportunities for your people to signal stress and resolve stress issues

- Regular opportunity to share thoughts and feelings, and tell you there is a problem (annual survey, annual performance review, employment assistance programmes (EAPs) available to staff, managers – with appropriate skills – talk regularly with their people, identified people, including health and safety representatives, have responsibility to 'spot' signs of stress and fatigue, EAP);
- Safety in using the process (no punishment or adverse impacts for raising issues);
- Appropriate support if there is a problem (including rapid trauma support and support for longer-term stress);
- Follow-up to check that support has made a positive difference;
- Identification of work issues; *and*
- Process to manage, improve and document approach to work stress issues (hazard is identified, eliminated, minimised, or isolated and then evaluated).

MANAGING WORK STRESS

Some employers are so worried about work stress stuff that they're tempted to ignore it – 'what you don't know can't hurt you' attitude. If individuals don't speak up about their often invisible stress and medical problems, it's hard to see why employers should be in the firing-line. This is why you need to give your people the chance to tell it like it is. Provide the opportunity for your employees to raise these issues and they are less likely to claim you neglected your duty.

Stress management courses are not necessarily going to produce the results you want. The OSH officials at the Department of Labour have already said that they don't rate them. There is some training, however, that can be useful:

- Train managers or those with stress assessment responsibilities to identify and respond appropriately to stress; *and*
- Provide training or coaching for those identified as being

particularly vulnerable to stress due to their jobs or their personal needs.

What is important is to create support systems that include assessment of impact. Simply sending someone to see a counsellor won't do. You need to have a process to find out if the individual is getting better, how to rehabilitate them back into work, and if they are not getting better a means to get the person into better support and/or out of your organisation.

If you don't you could be paying for people to take very long periods of stress-related sick leave, and then be facing a personal grievance.

To complicate matters, you need to be checking every example of an individual who indicates that they have a stress problem as a potential sick canary. Just as miners used to take a canary down the mine to give them early warning of bad air, every time a person shows the signs of stress you need to check the work situation.

SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS:

- Bring your trained health and safety representatives (if you have >30 staff, or you or your staff have seen the need for health and safety representatives) up to speed with your organisation's approach. Make sure they are reporting to senior management on work stress and wellness issues (they can do this without breaching confidentiality – by keeping their reports at the level of the work group – this enables you to identify the ►

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- responsible supervisor).
- Check your sick leave policies. Do your people need a medical certificate after 5 days off work? Do you have a case-management approach to rehabilitation?
- Make sure that your jobs are well-designed – that they have clear targets, do-able work and useful feedback on performance.
- Match people to jobs on the basis of relevant competencies and defensible job analysis.
- Consider a stress-vulnerability question during recruitment, such as ‘Given your understanding of the job, do you think you have any stress issues that would have an impact on your effectiveness?’ Check them against relevant stress-related competencies, just as you would any others. For example, can the job candidate get on top of the pressure points of their jobs (doing deals with tough negotiators for example?).
- Have good induction with clear H&S components.
- Provide appropriate training (e.g. astronauts get auto-suggestion training to help with sleeping – why not others who work in sleep-disrupting jobs?).
- Make sure you are giving supervisors important feedback – about absenteeism, voluntary staff turnover and staff satisfaction, for examples – and make them accountable for such results.
- Train your supervisors in the skills necessary for dealing with their people’s emotional welfare. There is evidence

- that simple skills (listening, warmth, and feedback, for example can make a significant difference to people’s welfare).
- Make sure that your performance management process includes the opportunity to ask the question – ‘Has your performance been adversely affected by stress or fatigue?’ And then to follow up the issues identified.
- Check your ‘Employment Brand’, does it signal to potential and existing employees the efforts that you make to support them (the perception of support contributes to feeling that work and life are in balance).
- Invest in process improvement for wellness, work/life balance and productivity improvement.
- Commit to appropriate and supportive change management when needed.
- Bring in stress management training for those who need it. Consider personal coaching. Team building may make a contribution.
- Make sure that your EAP or other external support provider is giving you appropriate information – feedback on how people are doing, and how they can be rehabilitated, and regular reports on work stress issues. ✨

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