Workplace Paper
Number 2

MANAGING STRESS

MANAGING STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Keenan Research Limited
Leading Consultants in Stress Management

"Helping organisations to help themselves"

WHY DOES STRESS NEED TO BE MANAGED?

Stress is a problem for all organisations, both large and small. According to current statistics, nearly 40% of all sickness absence across industry is due to mental ill-health.

If the sickness absence rates for other stress-related illnesses are also included, the number of lost working days is even higher. This is an unacceptable and unnecessary cost to business and industry.

WHAT IS STRESS?

"Stress is the reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed upon them. It arises when they worry that they can't cope."
(Health & Safety Executive)

This definition provides a central clue as to why managing stress in the workplace is so complex. For not only can pressures be wide-ranging but also those which may seem excessive to one person may not cause any problems to others.

Coping with stress can produce a wide range of adverse physical and psychological symptoms, ranging from high blood pressure, ulcers, heart-disease to mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety.

Some of the more common physiological reactions to stress can be:

- ❑ Loss of sleep, resulting in poorer relationships through tiredness and irritability.

- ❑ Headaches, back and neck pain which interferes with concentration and increases chances of having a workplace accident.

- ❑ Consumption of too much alcohol, possibly leading to excessive risks being taken.

Stress can have other tangible effects, such as in people taking time off or performing badly at work. And obviously all of these reactions can have significant effects on performance at work.

DOES STRESS AFFECT ALL ORGANISATIONS?

Almost certainly.

The impact of employee stress in any business can be far-reaching and affect productivity as well as effective decision-making.

For example, smaller organisations may find it hard to cover for absent staff, to reassign staff who have become stressed or to monitor their performance.

While larger organisations may have to accommodate high absence levels, with the accompanying costs and loss of output.

The effects of stress can also have additional ramifications for time-keeping, customer relations, quality of products and service levels, accidents and insurance costs.

These costs compound each other to produce a critical effect on the company bottom line.

If the problems arising from stress are not tackled effectively, organisations may find it difficult to sustain these costs in the longer-term.

HOW MUCH DOES STRESS COST?

Much more than is usually realised.

People suffering from work-related stress are less effective and produce a quality of work which is reduced in quantity or is of a poorer quality.

If people are absent, then output is lost completely.

If they become diagnosed as chronically ill because of occupational stress, organisations may have to defend themselves at an industrial tribunal or even in the high court.

The costs involved in any of these will almost certainly be far more than is budgeted for.

HOW CAN WORK-RELATED STRESS BE MANAGED?

There are number things that all organisations, from the smallest to the largest, can do to reduce the effect of occupational stress.

These include:

- ❑ **Developing a Policy for managing stress at work**, along with a clear Code of Practice – to provide a framework that is easily implemented and understood by all staff.

- ❑ **Carrying out a Stress Audit** – to identify potential hazards relating to work-related stress and to be aware where issues need to be addressed.

- ❑ **Training managers and supervisors** – to assist them to adopt an appropriate management style; to develop further their interpersonal skills; and to know what referral procedures to use.

- ❑ **Reviewing selection procedures for staff** – to ensure that the staff appointed are suitable for the job and more able to cope with workplace pressures.

- ❑ **Evaluating staffing levels** – to decide whether these are appropriate and to make adjustments accordingly.

- ❑ **Supporting staff** – to know what assistance is available from the Health authority, voluntary organisations or the Health and Safety Executive.

WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS DO?

Recognising that stress is manageable is the first step in getting to grips with stress.

It is important to understand that by having a structured approach, organisations are more in control to manage stress positively.

Helping people work better

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