

## **Risk Assessment - Work Related Stress (WRS)**

Stress is the second biggest cause of occupational ill-health generally, and the biggest cause of absence amongst non-manual workers. WRS is preventable and action to reduce WRS can be very cost-effective. There is a growing recognition that work related stress can be dealt with in the same way as other health and safety issues, by adapting the same basic principles and processes as for other workplace hazards - ie through risk assessment and management.

It is essential to include workers in this process; they should be asked what is causing stress, which groups are suffering, and what could be done to help. The 'five steps' to risk assessment are discussed below with specific reference to stress at work.

### **Finding out if there is a problem.**

Risk factors to look out for are:

- Culture or 'atmosphere' of the organisation, and how it currently approaches WRS;
- Demands such as workload and exposure to physical hazards;
- Control - how much influence workers have in the way they do their work;
- Relationships - covering issues like bullying and harassment;
- Change - how organisational change is managed and communicated;
- Role - whether the workers understand their role in the organisation and that conflict in their role is avoided;
- Support from colleagues and managers;
- Training to give workers the skills to perform their task;
- Individual factors - catering for individual differences.

### **Deciding who might be harmed and how.**

Everyone is vulnerable, depending on the pressure we're under at any given time. The factors identified above will help to determine who is at risk. The following may indicate that there is a problem:

#### The Organisation

- Participation: absenteeism, high staff turnover, poor time-keeping, disciplinary problems, aggressive communication, isolation, bullying.
- Performance: Reduced output or quality of product or service, accidents, poor decision-making, errors.
- Costs: Increased costs from compensation or increased health care costs, referrals to health services.

## The Individual

- Behaviour: Tobacco, alcohol or drug abuse, violence, bullying or harassment.
- Psychological: Sleep problems, anxiety disorders, depression, inability to concentrate, irritability, family relationship problems, burnout.
- Health: Back problems, heart problems, peptic ulcers, hypertension, depressed immune system.

## **Evaluating the risk**

For each of the factors in step 1, the following questions should be asked:

- What action is already being taken?
- Is this enough?
- What more needs to be done?
- Some suggestions about what to look out for and what to do are given below:

## Culture

Is there good open communication, support and mutual respect?

Are views from workers and their representatives valued?

- If not, communication should be improved, particularly for staff who work remotely.

## Demands

Are staff overloaded or underloaded, do they have the capabilities and capacities for their tasks?

What is the physical environment like (eg noise, vibration, ventilation, lighting etc)?

What is the psychological environment like (eg violence, bullying etc)?

- Sufficient resources should be made available if there are problems eg tasks should be re-prioritised.
- Staff training should enable people to carry out their tasks competently.

## Control

Do individuals have sufficient say in the way their work is carried out?

- Staff should have control to plan their own work, and make decisions about how work should be completed and how to solve problems. Jobs should be enriched so staff can use their skills to advantage. A supportive environment is crucial.

## Relationships

How are relationships between colleagues and between colleagues and managers? What about relationships between managers and senior managers? Is there evidence of any bullying or harassment?

- Procedures should be available, such as disciplinary and grievance procedures, to deal with unacceptable behaviour. A culture should be developed where staff trust each other and recognise each other's contributions.

## Change

Are workers anxious about their employment status? Are they confused by workplace changes and what it means for them and their colleagues?

- Clear communication helps - before, during and after change.
- Giving staff the chance to influence change makes them more involved.

## Role

Do people suffer role conflict (conflicting demands) or role ambiguity (Lack of clarity)?

- Staff should have a clearly defined role and responsibilities.

## Support, training and individual factors

Is there an adequate induction for new recruits and staff whose jobs have changed? Are staff given social support? Is account taken of individual differences eg some members may thrive on working to tight deadlines; others like time to plan.

- Staff should be supported, given feedback and encouraged, even when things go wrong. Involve staff and value diversity.
- Workplace health promotion activities should be encouraged along with a healthy work-life balance.

## **Recording the main findings**

It is good practice to record the main findings from the assessment and to share the information with employees (and their representatives where relevant). This record should help to monitor progress.

## **Review the assessment at appropriate intervals**

The assessment should be reviewed whenever significant changes happen in the organisation. Again, this should be done in consultation with employees. The impact of measures taken to reduce WRS should be checked.

The significant findings of the assessment should be used by Managers to draw up an action plan, and then should communicate these findings to the employees. The appropriate action then needs to be taken to ensure that stress is effectively managed. Remember to have regard to the following:

- You should remember to involve staff and their representatives - they are certain to have good ideas you could use;
- Any changes made should be followed up to ensure they are having the desired effect;
- Review what you've done when you make major changes in your workplace (eg organisational change, new equipment, work systems or processes) to make sure stress hasn't increased;
- Lead by example - as a manager, you can communicate powerful signals about the importance of avoiding stress.

## **Helpful Information:**

- Tackling work-related stress: A managers guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well being. HSE 2001 HSG218: ISBN 0-7176-2050-6
- Mental well-being in the workplace: A resource pack for management training and development. HSE 1998 ISBN 0-7176-1524-3
- Work Related Stress: A short guide. HSE 2001 INDG28 (rev 1)
- European Agency for Safety and Health at Work: Factsheets 8, 22, 23, 24  
<http://osha.eu.int>
- Risk Assessment - General Information Sheet

## **Contact**

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