Stress and Work-related Illness

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# Introduction

Studies have shown that stress-related illness was one of the fastest growing types of worker compensation claims in the 1980s (Murphy, 1995). However, the subject of stress and work-related illness is an extremely complex one to determine and to document. Two workers in identical situations within the workplace may have very differing reactions to the environment due to differences in temperament and personal circumstances outside the workplace.

Thankfully the investigation into stress and work-related illnesses has grown in popularity over the last few years. The causes are becoming better understood, the impact on workplace productivity in being researched at more in-depth levels and some employers are beginning to understand that the purely physical workplace hazards are not the only health and safety concern they need to be aware of.

# Causes of Workplace Stress and Work-Related Illness

As stated in the introduction, different people react to the same environment in many different ways. However, studies have shown that there are a number of factors which do cause work-related stress in large numbers of people. Here I have attempted to split them into purely workplace factors and those external factors which increase the likelihood of stress within the workplace.

## Workplace Factors

There are a few factors within the workplace which can directly contribute to stress:

* workload and workpace - work overload and underload can both be factors for stress in the workplace, as can the pace at which employees are expected to work.
* shiftwork - changing shifts between day and night working frequently leads to fragmented or poor sleep and does not allow the employee to recover fully before starting the new shift.
* physical environment - noisy, polluted or crowded environments are all known to cause health issues when experienced to excess, but even levels well within the allowed guidelines can have a detrimental impact on employee well-being.
* job security - In the current economic climate and with the increase of globalization many workers fear that their job in not secure. This leads to an often self-imposed pressure to perform above expectations in an attempt to increase their job security.
* career development - lack of career development opportunities or being promoted beyond the workers ability or desire increases the level of tension for the worker.
* workplace relationships - adversarial relationships with co-workers or management can obviously increase workplace stress.
* organizational structure/management - the feeling that management do not respect their workers, lack of opportunity to improve the working situation and lack of control over their working lives in general are contributing factors to workplace stress.
* new technology - the introduction over the last decade or so of new technology has had serious implications for worker stress - the requirement to be available outside office hours, the changes associated with learning new technology and the potential for increased monitoring all affect how the worker perceives their job and the associated stress levels.
* lack of control - when a worker has little or no control over any of the above factors they can develop a feeling of helplessness and alienation.

## External Factors

In addition to the factors listed above as being directly related to the workplace, there are many factors outside the workplace which are known to have an adverse affect on workplace stress. These include:

* Child or elder care needs - many families now have two working partners (or are single parent families) meaning they need to find child care in order to continue to work. This can lead to stress and guilt as some may feel like they are abandoning their child to strangers or that they are putting work ahead of their family even though they need to work for the income. In addition to this, the "baby boomer" generation is now increasingly finding themselves also responsible for their aging parents and relatives, which increases the worry.
* Financial worries -if people are finding it difficult to make ends meet each month, or have found themselves in financial difficulties, the stress they feel about that situation can often lead to other smaller situations feeling more stressful than they may otherwise be.
* Health issues - if an individual is diagnosed with a health problem their concerns may be increased by financial worries because their job does not provide full health coverage, or that they may be penalized in some way for taking the time out of work to deal with that health issue.
* Personal problems (divorce, relocation, etc.) - people going through stressful times outside of the work situation, such as divorce, moving house, family concerns, etc. may find that the workplace increases their stress levels as they worry about how they are going to juggle the demands of their job with the increased pressure for their personal situation.

# Possible Sources of Conflict in Dealing with Workplace Stress

Since almost no individual is completely free of potentially stressful factors in their personal life, one of the major causes of conflict when dealing with workplace stress is the actual agreement that the workplace is indeed the cause, or at least the major contributory factor, in the stress experienced by that individual.

A second likely source of conflict is the treatment of workplace stress. Historically, stress has been seen as the problem of the individual, and not of the workplace in general. This means that the individual was usually left to learn to manage the symptoms of stress (with or without employer support) as opposed to the root cause of the stress being dealt with by the employer and employee in tandem.

A final source of conflict is the profit motive of the business. Businesses exist primarily to generate profit, unless they find that the working environment is damaging that profit margin they may well be reluctant to implement any schemes which may alleviate stress even if they know that the environment is generating stress among the workers. Until the absenteeism reaches (or threatens to reach) the level at which the compensation paid is higher than the cost of any intervention scheme they may decide to do nothing and allow the situation to continue to the detriment of the workforce they employ. In the paper by Giga, Cooper, and Faragher (2003) there is a statement that "Although there is broad recognition of the harmful effects of stress on individuals and organizations,........................there has been a failure by employers to invest adequately in stress reduction initiatives in the workplace."

# Possible Methods for Remediating Workplace Stress

For many different reasons, workplace stress would be very difficult to manage through legislation. Although some causes can be regulated through law or public policy, such as noise and pollution, overcrowding, and maximum working hours, the major causes in general must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. This means that the main contribution that the government could make would be more in the form of support, perhaps in the form of tax breaks, for initiatives designed by the employer to reduce stress in the workplace. Schemes designed to reduce the internal and external causes of stress could be planned at a higher level and incentives given for any companies which cared to implement those schemes.

There are several relatively simple and low-cost schemes which have been suggested to reduce the stress levels potentially caused by the above factors:

* education - this need not be job-specific, but can include career development, management techniques, relationship techniques, and other more general but useful guidance and training sessions.
* job rotation - to alleviate the stress which can be caused by boring or repetitive tasks, it has been suggested that companies can implement a job rotation scheme. This would allow employees to experience different aspects of the business and give them the opportunity to experience new things and would break the monotony of their usual job.
* improved communications - significant amounts of stress can be caused by speculation and rumour about company policies, suspected redundancies and company performance. Much of this stress can be mitigated very simply by the company communicating on a regular basis about policy, proposed changes, and issuing clear guidelines on expectations for employee performance. They can also provide a method for employee feedback and enhancement suggestions, which would allow the workers to feel more involved and in control of the situation.

There is an increasing amount of scientific evidence to show the major causes of stress in the workplace, it's resulting affect on the employees, and possible programs that could be used by companies to help deal with the results in their workforce. If companies were to investigate or perform their own study on the largest stress-causing factors within their environment they would be able to make policy changes or management decisions that would allow them to implement the kind of scheme that would have the most effect on reducing the causes within their own workplace.

All of the papers I read do agree on major one point. In the main, programs designed to help employees deal with stress in the workplace have tended to lean heavily on the individual without regard to investigating the actual root causes. They suggest in future, programs should have more management involvement and employer/employee dialogue to not only help the employee manage the symptoms of stress, but to allow the causes of the stress to be identified and mitigated if possible.

# Summary

Although there is increasing scientific evidence to support the causes, symptoms, and costs of stress and work-related illness, there appears to be little that direct government intervention can do to reduce or prevent the causes. Mikklesen and Gundersen state that "The subjective experience of stress, however, may differ in individuals exposed to the same workloads because of differences in personality, coping style, or values." (Mikklesen and Gundersen, 2003). This means that the primary drivers for any policy changes or management decisions must come from the businesses themselves, with government playing a subsidiary role by potentially offering incentives to businesses who provide programs to help their employees deal with this issue.

Overall, stress and work-related illness is a very complex subject. The variety of factors involved, both internal and external to the workplace, means that effective legislation is extremely unlikely, the main hope is that businesses begin to realise the financial benefits of investigating and mitigating the causes within their own unique situation and implementing corporate policy to allow individuals to manage or reduce the problem. Government could legislate for workplace changes that may help, such as flexible working, childcare/eldercare facilities, etc., but the main impetus must come from the employers themselves, with significant employee consultation, in order for any scheme to be seriously effective.

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